

# Three Boats, a Horse and a Taxi: Pacific Feminists at the AWID Forums



Tales from the  
AWID Forums

awid

*This story is about how an increasingly diverse group of feminists from the Pacific organised through the years to attend the AWID Forums and how that process changed them personally, as organizations, and as a movement through what they learned, discovered and experienced. In a process that is similar to the one undergone by particular feminist constituencies (like Indigenous women, young feminists or women with disabilities), it illustrates the importance of the Forums as a space through which a region that tends to be marginalized or ignored at the global level can build a strong presence in the feminist movement that is then replicated at other international women's rights spaces (like those organised by the UN).*

*Like almost all the Forum stories that we are telling as part of the Forum Stories of Change project, this one could not have happened (also) without AWID's active involvement and support. AWID's awareness that the Forums were suitable spaces for this kind of regional organising and its willingness to work with activists from the region and support their efforts were instrumental to the process.*

## **Going beyond the Mothers: a delegation for the Cape Town Forum**

Some important Pacific feminists, the Mothers of the movement in the region, most of them from Fiji, had been at the Forum's early editions as experts and plenary speakers. But the first time Pacific Islanders mobilized themselves as a movement to attend an AWID Forum was for the Cape Town edition (2008). The presence of Pacific activists as AWID Board Members – including its then recently appointed President, Brigid Inder, from New Zealand – and International Planning Committee (IPC) members for the Forum was one of the factors supporting a larger and more visible presence of Pacific Islanders in Cape Town.

Back then, Virisila Buadromo and Michelle Reddy were part of the organization called Fiji Women's Rights Movement. They were among those who – without having done anything like this before – went out and started talking to donors in their region to convince them to make sure that the daughters, granddaughters and even the rebellious cousins of the movement could also be exposed to the AWID experience.

None of them had been to a Forum but they believed in building women's movements and an international presence for Pacific feminists, and, based on what they heard from those who had attended, they thought the Forum was a great space to do it: "We felt a sense of duty to try and get as many Pacific Islanders to the Forum as possible".

They knew what the Pacific delegation they wanted to create looked like: it was younger, full of frontline defenders and from as many communities and locations across the Pacific as possible. It was a powerful process for Virisila and Michelle but not at all easy.

"I was able to see my power to mobilise people in the region and shift their minds, including those of funders who normally don't like paying for trips, making them understand that having a large and diverse Pacific Islanders' delegation at the AWID Forum was valuable and they needed to support it. I understood my own power and what I could do with it - that constructive, collective view of power that we have as feminists (our "power with" and "power to")" - says Virisila.

They also encouraged as many Pacific activists as possible to apply for funding and register to attend the Forum. That was not easy either: for Pacific Islanders to travel to Cape Town is to go across the world. Also, there are very few South African embassies in the Pacific so people had to send their passport by mail to New Zealand or Australia just to apply for a visa, without any certainty that they would get it.

At the time, Internet was pretty expensive. Virisila and Michelle who live in Fiji had it, but for the rest of the region it was a challenge. So for many of the discussions they had with the activists to organise for the Forum, people in other Pacific nations had to go and sit in their local New Zealand or Australian embassies where they could access the Internet. In the end, they all relied a lot on their phones.

## **Making the most of it: preparations**

As the time for the Forum was approaching and the agenda arrived, Virisila's heart missed a beat: "It was overwhelming even for me who was well-traveled, just imagine..."

The whole group realized that they needed to do some serious preparations for the experience so nobody, including the organisers themselves, would run away in shock. Virisila and Michelle shared some of the things they did – a model for organising a constituency that is new to a large international event with strong doses of care and good humour:

- The Pacific delegation arrived a couple of days in advance for a pre-meeting, so they could all meet each other and understand who may need what kind of support in the coming days. The meeting included an orientation session about the Forum and a guided tour of the venue.
- The more experienced ones shared tips on how to pick sessions (even though surprises ended up being the best part of the program for some of them, as we shall see soon)
- A buddy system paired newcomers with those who had already been at a Forum for ongoing support
- A booth was rented to become the Pacific hub, meeting point, home away from the storm, and many other things.
- Daily check-ins where everyone shared the contact information they had acquired and their impressions, and meals together were scheduled.

Believe it or not, 46 Pacific Islanders attended the Cape Town Forum. And they were not only participants. “We pushed to also have people from our region speaking in the plenaries, not just because we wanted to see ourselves reflected there but because we had important things to share. It was our offering to the Forum. Someone told me that the smallest delegation (ours) had made the biggest impact there!” – proudly remembers Virisila.

## **A lesson in organising ... and generosity**

This successful mode of organising was repeated for the two subsequent AWID Forums: Istanbul (2012) and Bahia (2016). And, not only there. As Michelle says, “That exercise helped generating the ways in which we fundraise, advocate, and lobby for our international presence at other events, like the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)”.

It may shock our readers to learn that both Virisila and Michelle continued to fundraise for and organise the Pacific delegations for Istanbul and Bahia but they never again attended a Forum. Here is why: “Only 30% of those who went to Istanbul had been to Cape Town. 70% of the delegation were first-timers. We wanted it to be even more diverse, so we invited sex workers and trans people. For Bahia we prioritized rural women, real frontline defenders fighting against climate change, those women who had to take three boats, a horse and a taxi to get to the airport and travel to the Forum” – explains Virisila.

Michelle speaks fondly about the relationships the Forum helped forge, “With the years, those relationships between activists who were in the Forum delegations have continued and transformed into friendships”. And those human, affectionate relationships made across nationalities and identities help make the threads that hold Pacific feminist activism together, much stronger.

## First (and lasting) impressions

“Before Cape Town, I had never been in a place with so many feminists, women human rights defenders and activists. It was my first global event and it took my breath away” – says Michelle. “It was an eye opener for me about the many different kinds of feminism that people practice and embody. It made me aware of feminism not just as a school of thought, but as a way of life, a journey”– adds Virisila.

We said earlier that the Forum had transformed its Pacific feminists as individuals and in their organizations and movements. And now we will tell you how it happened.



*Quite a lot of us, including me, went into the sessions and realized that we are all in our little bubbles, like planets that never meet. AWID is where you can meet beyond your bubble (Virisila)*

## Self-care is not (just) a bourgeois thing

### Virisila says:

“Before going to Cape Town I was pretty judgemental and had very fixed, rigid ideas about what my feminist practice was and should be. This of course was influenced by my context – we were in the midst of a coup-d’état and a conflict, and for the pro-democracy movement I was part of it was important to have principles and hold on to them.

I stumbled into a workshop that was not on my to-go list. It was the one on *What’s the Point of Revolution if We Can’t Dance?* It was the launch of the book. There was a circle of WHRDs from around the world talking about exhaustion, burnout – things that I was experiencing but could not articulate. I was mentored by feminists who said, “take it on” and talked about those kinds of things as weaknesses. I was taught that when terrible things happened to you that was a badge of honour. But when seated there and hearing them ... that was the first time I heard about self-care and understood what it meant. That was a fundamental shift for me.

I was trying to internalize it all. I bought the book and read it in the next one to two days. Then I found the authors and told them “I am from Fiji, this book changed my life”. They introduced me to the CEO of Urgent Action Fund (UAF) and then I applied for a grant so we could do digital security training and support. By the time I got home I had started to understand that care and looking after yourself are political acts, as self-preservation is. It shifted the way I thought about activism. I started to look for ways to integrate self-care within my organization, even pushing funders to give us support so we could institutionalize it. I got the grant from UAF and we managed to do encryption and put digital security measures in place. One and a half years later I shifted one of our biggest donors to increase our salaries and made sure that everybody in the team got health coverage, which was a very uncommon thing back then. That was the starting point.

And now I am the co-Lead of UAF-Asia and the Pacific”.

## Rediscovering a heritage through the power of art

### And Michelle:

“Driven by our experiences in Cape Town we also learned about how to organise differently in the Pacific, in a manner that is truly moving, not just listening to someone talking for hours. We took back home methodologies we had seen in the sessions. It was a space of learning and then we adapted and tested what we had learned.

In Cape Town there was an artist and you could sit for them, they would do your portrait. They did (activist) Ofa Guttenbeil - Likiliki potrait wearing a sarong and a hibiscus flower in her hair, a bright flower. I can still see it. To me that was the one moment that opened it up: I had never seen art in this way. I saw how this person just captured this activist and wondered if we could do the same back home.

There were other things as well: the opening and closing moments always included songs that had a meaning, they were not random. Those were rituals. Feminist rituals are symbolic – they are ours to determine and define, as a group. Rituals, songs and chants are all very powerful –they are linked to the belief that memories are powerful ways of resistance. You can resist if you maintain and document your struggles. Songs, poetry and stories are significant ways to do that.

Fiji Women’s Rights Movement (FWRM) had a Young Women’s Leadership program called the Emerging Leaders Forum for 18 to 25 year-olds. Coming back from the Forum we encouraged them to read and to write – two of those young women are now writers – and we went as far as to explore setting up a Pacific female choir. On March 8 we insisted on not playing mainstream songs but created our own songs – we had song writers coming out of that experience too.

The leadership program also had a GIRLS program for 10-12 years old. With them we did chants and marches, they created their own chants. Also photography – in Fiji, most photographers are males but we got a female photographer to teach it to the girls as a skill.

All that made our programs more interesting and in a lot of ways more specific to our heritage, as a lot of our Pacific narratives are driven by art. That has always been under-valued, and still is, but over time feminist organizations like FWRM put emphasis on recognizing and using some of those arts forms for activism. We have also incorporated Fijian feminist art in our publications. There is a story and a narrative behind that imagery and it is intentionally feminist and political and the Forum opened the doors for us to realise it”.

## Other transformations – and creations

“The definition of ‘woman’ also changed in the region thanks to exposure to the Forum”, explains Virisila. “We tried to get women leaders who had very fixed ideas about this to go to AWID. And then it shifted for them too toward a more diverse and expansive definition of women – now even terms like ‘non-binary’ or ‘gender non-conforming’ are spoken and talked about and included in our idea of diversity. These key women leaders were going together to the Forum with LBT activists; they travelled together, they had those ‘corridor moments’ where there was a process of education, of learning and unlearning. That built relationships and trust between these communities and then we saw the shift in Fiji first with more inclusive language adopted and manifested. And then the same happened in Tonga and Samoa”.

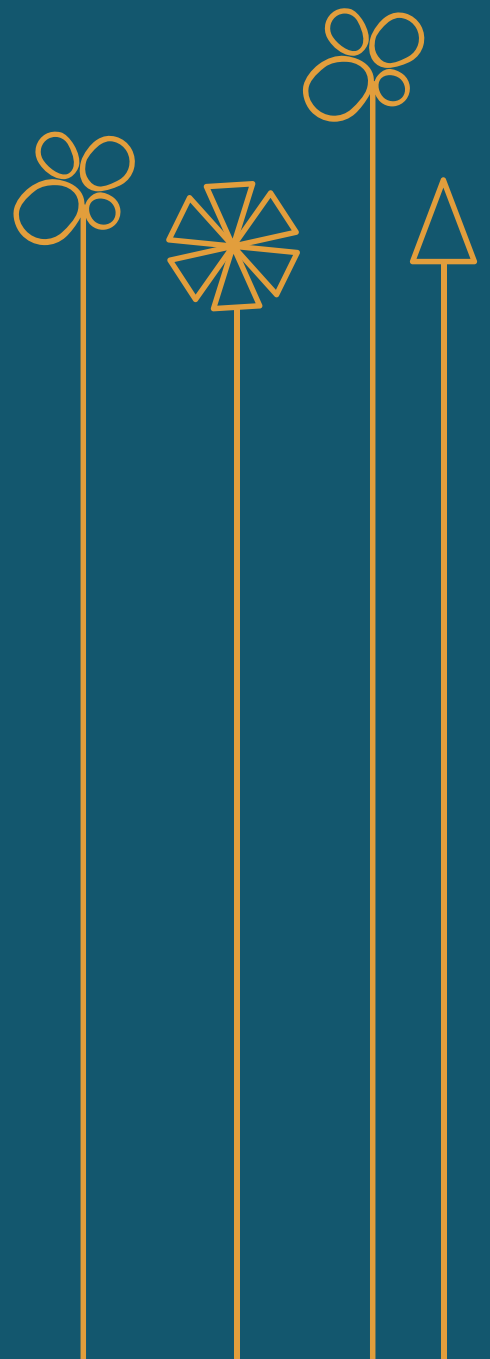
Even with these extraordinary organisers it became clear that only a small group of activists can ever attend the AWID Forums. So in the Pacific they created “an AWID for Pacific Islanders”: the Pacific Feminist Forum (PFFs) that follows the collaborative model of organising of its mother-Forum. The convener, Fiji Women’s Rights Movement, creates a Steering Committee that includes four or five other organizations from across the region as well as representatives of queer and other movements.

The PFFs are scheduled to take place one year before AWID. Two have already happened in 2016 and 2018/9 and the next one is scheduled for 2022/3.

“The forum was the epitome experience: people dancing, chanting, making things, launching books, strategizing, taking to the streets. Everything in one”, says Michelle. And so, we are sure, must be the PFF! ✨



There was a feeling in the air, an energy,  
a buzz that made you feel brilliant, sexy,  
all the best things in the world. It was  
just the energy of so many feminists  
together in the same place!  
Virisila Buadromo



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