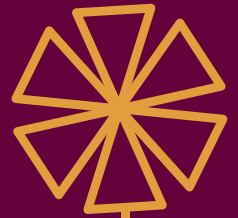




Tales from the AWID Forums



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



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



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

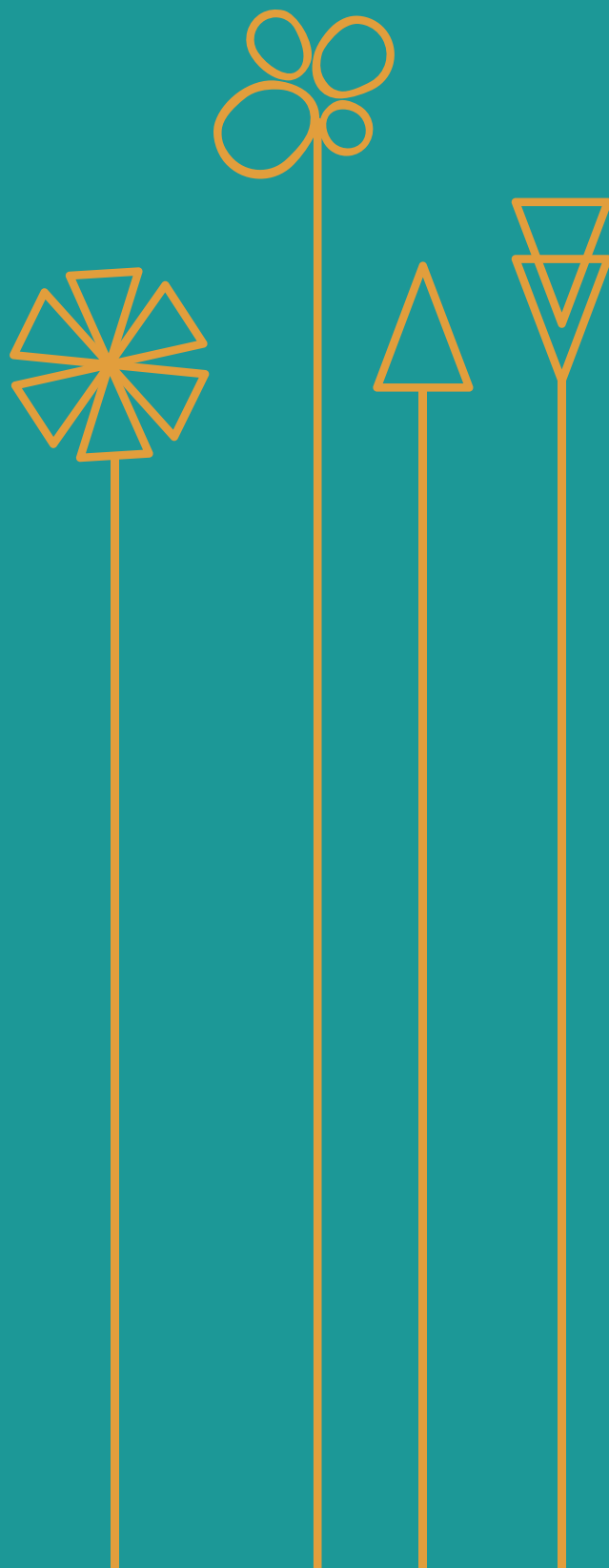
“The definition of ‘woman’ also changed in the region thanks to exposure to the Forum”, explains Virisila. “We tried to get women leaders who had very fixed ideas about this to go to AWID. And then it shifted for them too toward a more diverse and expansive definition of women – now even terms like ‘non-binary’ 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! ✨

**The world came
to my home:
Tidinha's story**



2

Tidinha is an environmental activist, a feminist, and an anti-racist activist. She is part of the traditional Afro-Indigenous communities in Massarandupió, a wonderful beach in Bahia, Brazil, very close to Costa do Sauipe where the AWID Forum was held in 2016. Tidinha is a teacher, a farmer, and a member of a cooperative. She is passionate about her territory and about justice.

The 2016 AWID Forum was the first international event of this magnitude that Tidinha attended. She says:

“I came to the Forum with questions about why they had chosen a location that for us stands for environmental violations, and also other kinds of exploitation, like the sexual exploitation of girls. Costa de Sauipe, the place where the Forum was held here in Brazil, has most of its luxury hotels built on the dunes, that has destroyed our environment, and as an environmental-protection activist if I have to go to one of those places, I will question a lot. I did not feel restrained: I challenged (the organisers) a lot and I realized they listened and respected what I said. They explained to me that they needed a large enough space for that number of people and then I understood why Costa de Sauipe had been chosen”.

Due to its size, but also because it includes a wide array of feminist presences, the AWID Forums require a space that is not only big but also safe and fully accessible for bodies of all kinds. Unfortunately such spaces are often not the alternative ones where we feminists feel most at home, but belong to the corporate world – luxury hotels and conference centers – and through the years this has always led to serious challenges within AWID and also by brave Forum participants like Tidinha.¹

AWID’s capacity to acknowledge and explain these contradictions and limitations, to listen to dissent and respect it, has allowed those expressing it to stay in the space and explore its other elements, as happened with Tidinha.

Shareen Gokal, who worked at AWID for many years, says that “The Forum is an alchemy that just happens”. How was that alchemical transformation for Tidinha? To see the diversity of participants, to be in a safe space, to be able to express herself without fear, to be respected and heard were the ingredients that made the Forum stay in her memory, stimulating her presence and shaping her future:

1 For instance: during the 2005 Forum in Bangkok, some of the trade unionist participants also joined a protest that took place in front of the hotel that was the venue of the Forum. They were part of organising the protest against the precarious working conditions for the hotel staff.

“I realized I am not alone. That there are many women fighting across the world and that our struggle is worth it. Before (the Forum) I was shy and now I feel more free, with more energy, with more courage. Inhibition is off! I also felt safe there, because in some spaces where we participate, we are afraid to say some things because we know we will be harassed afterwards. At the Forum I felt safe and respected, even after I had voiced my criticisms. Lots of people came to ask me questions after that. I felt supported.”

To see the diversity also means to understand the struggles of others. Tidência says she was moved by the presentations made by sex workers: “with a lot of autonomy and proud of being who they are. I found their attitude, their autonomy, marvellous”.

When what seemed far away becomes close, our perspective changes. We can no longer see our reality in the same way, because now we are wearing a different pair of lenses. And for that, no language is needed – it is closeness that takes care of everything. Tidência says:

“I met this very nice activist from India and what I experienced with her will stay with me all my life. I invited her to see my community and she came! She spent a whole day with us here, we shared many experiences. We communicated through gestures and words in English and Portuguese, and we managed to understand each other”.

Our new lenses also have an influence on how we feel. When we look at our own reality in a different way, it may be that – as it happened to Tidência – we start giving a different value to what we do and have:

“(The Indian woman) was delighted to see all the communal land and she said that in India there is a scarcity of land, that only the very rich have land. She said that all her plants are in pots and she could not believe the plantations we had. That was very important for me. I did not know that about India and I started to value what we have much more – it may be modest but it is valuable”.

One has to learn how to take care of the earth – both the planet and the concrete one in our plantations or pots. Tidência, who is also a farmer, took the Indian activist to the local rural farmers’ association. There her guest saw that no pesticides were being used and she was very happy about it. She had lunch with the local farmers and then visited the organization that the women farmers have created to take care of their own issues. During the visit, the Indian guest bought a piece of Indigenous (Tupinambá) art to take home.

To feel important, to be part of an event as big as the AWID Forum had a deep impact on Tidência. She has many reasons to be proud of being who she is, of her roots, and the importance of the Indigenous people's arts on the legacy that her mother, Joana, is passing on to her.

Tidência came to tell us about her experience at the AWID Forum accompanied by her mother, who showed us the art she creates and talked about her daily life that includes bathing in the sea, taking care of animals and the plantation. Joana was also moved by the visit of the Indian activist, and she says that the joy that brought her still lives inside of her. Tidência gave space to her mother in her conversation with us as a way to reinforce that she is not alone, and she was not alone when attending the Forum, that she went there carrying with her other presences, those that preceded her existence and those who could not attend but had asked her to represent them in the space. And she shared her thoughts for the future:

“I know the Forum cannot welcome everybody from the community. I thought a lot about my sisters in the struggle who could not attend. This is why I imagine, that in the future, the Forum can spread itself around its venue. Just like that Indian activist came to see our reality, it would be great if other activists attending the Forum would go to the communities and talk to local people”.

That is Tidência: whenever she sees a challenge, she comes up with an alternative to solve it. Full of emotion and ancestral wisdom, she is committed to mobilise resources together with other women to attend the next Forums! ✨

Flowering Under the World's Umbrella: MENA Feminists at the AWID Forums

3

The Forum is a live example
of what the bigger WE can do.
We go to the Forum, we are
seeds, we then get sowed.
This we have to celebrate.
Sara Abu Ghazal



Across the world and social movements, those who want to innovate tend to feel lonely and powerless before the 'movement status quo'. Historically, the AWID Forums have played a role in supporting these innovators by offering them a platform where their ideas and practices are welcomed and strengthened by the thoughts and actions of others - in different regions and communities - who have already explored them. Sara Abu Ghazal, Palestinian feminist in Lebanon, tells the story of what the Forums meant for a new generation of feminists in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region that introduced new ways of organising, new understandings of feminism and new issues to the regional women's rights landscape.

The story begins around 2008-2009

Sara says...

“Back then there were smaller, non-registered feminist collectives throughout the region. Our generation was more comfortable (than the elders) in calling ourselves feminists and in saying we were queer or even lesbian, LGBTQ. There were also the already-existing bigger organizations that had been to (the UN World Conference on Women in) Beijing, focusing on women's rights, with very specific discourses about combatting violence against women from a victimising perspective. They would try hard to package their discourse in ways that did not upset society - which was the opposite of what we wanted to do.

That generation also had grown up and were almost adults and young adults when the civil war was over, so in a way their investment in reform comes from their need or perception of state 'building'. We were the generation that were pre-teens/ children when the war was over, so our perception of the state and of politics more broadly came from a totally different experience.

Our groups and collectives were floating, trying to find our place and pushing forward an understanding of feminism as unpacking and contesting power. We started talking about lesbianism, 'smashing patriarchy', 'Our Bodies Our Rights'. In

early 2008, we created women-only spaces. We demonstrated. We talked about rape and sexual violence; we organised with migrant workers against the sponsorship system¹ – all topics that the more established movement did not have space for.

In the meantime, older women in the movement persisted in trying not to upset governments or society too much. We were accused of being men haters and asked to tone down, to stop saying the word ‘lesbian’ or ‘sex’ or ‘sexuality’ etc. We were about movement building because in a sense most of us needed an umbrella; they were about reform. It was a tense situation and there was an unbalance of power because the ‘good feminists’ were the only ones with access to the media and institutional recognition.

After a few years of tension, we stopped sharing spaces. Many of us made our living by working in women’s rights organizations and we had to leave our jobs”.

And then the world opened up

It was around that time that the AWID Forum in Istanbul (2012) happened. And it changed forever the way in which Sara and others who back then were young feminists from MENA perceived themselves and their work:

Spaces like the AWID Forum were just made for people like us: it was full of lesbians, sex workers, trade unionists, and unapologetic feminists who believed in inter-generational diversity. We realized that we were not an exceptional, weird type of feminist: we were internationalist in our discourse and local in our practice. We realized we were really not alone: there was a bigger kind of movement that could hold the space for us and lift us up. That feeling is crucial for any grassroots activist.

The Forum also validated these young feminists in two important ways: their sexuality and their organising choices:

In our context we had been criticized – told that we were radical because we were lesbians. And at the Forum our sexuality was celebrated instead of us being asked to tone

1 The sponsorship or *Kafala* system regulates the relationship between foreign workers and employers in Saudi Arabia and many of the Gulf countries. The system has been condemned by human rights institutions for years as it enables serious violations of workers’ rights.

it down. We also understood that you don't have to be an NGO, register and take big funds in order to do the work you want to do – you can just get the small money that you need and do your own things your way.

Finding sisters in your own region

The Istanbul Forum was intended to provide a platform for feminist groups in the MENA region to come together. In a region where security and costs made it difficult for informal collectives to meet each other, the Forum was the ideal place for that meeting to occur. And so it did.

We met others from our region and realized they were in a similar space as us. That was a crucial point in our process of change. After the Forum, we organized a knowledge production meeting with different groups in the region and embarked on a collaborative process on what is feminist knowledge production.

Post-Forum shining colours (not blues)

The (then) young feminists went back home and re-established themselves with more confidence. At the Forum they had met women's funds that gave them grants for what they most wanted to do: creating and sustaining their networks along with events to raise awareness, provoke, build solidarity and bring in new discussions.

From then on, the way I organised was not about watching the established women's organizations and criticizing them but about doing things our way. We were more connected than we had known – we had the right approach and the space to share it. Spaces like the AWID Forum were just made for people like us. That made quite a difference. Our being in that Forum also signaled a lesson to our elders: that this new generation was there to stay and they had to find ways to accept us or to negotiate the spaces with us, realizing that we were not going to be intimidated and just leave.

The Coalition of Women Human Rights Defenders in MENA

The Coalition was started in 2015 and it brings together individuals and organizations defending a spectrum of rights and struggles in the MENA region. The relationships forged at the Forum have been instrumental in shaping it, as Sara describes:

Through our involvement in the Forum and the relationship AWID had built with us and others in the region, 14 of us from 10 countries travelled for a learning exchange with the Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative (IMD) in Mexico. That gave us a hands-on experience in understanding what well-being was and also on how to organise a network of defenders. I used to think well-being was something horrible, did not want to have anything to do with it. I had seen only horrible models of wellbeing. But then in Mexico I met Ana María Hernández, who talked about wellbeing as something important for security and decision-making, having to do with values and the emotional cost of our work. We realized we needed to do things differently because what we are fighting against takes time to overthrow – but if we lose people along the way, those losses are forever. We learned about the importance of a healthy environment, of having support systems, of talking about your feelings.

All this gave the grassroots feminists that were creating the Coalition more of a push to make sure it remained at the movement level and did not become just a coalition of organizations.

New questions and challenges: the Bahia Forum

Once again, the role of a global space like the Forum to enable regional work when the circumstances in the context hindered it, became evident for the MENA feminists in Bahia (2016):

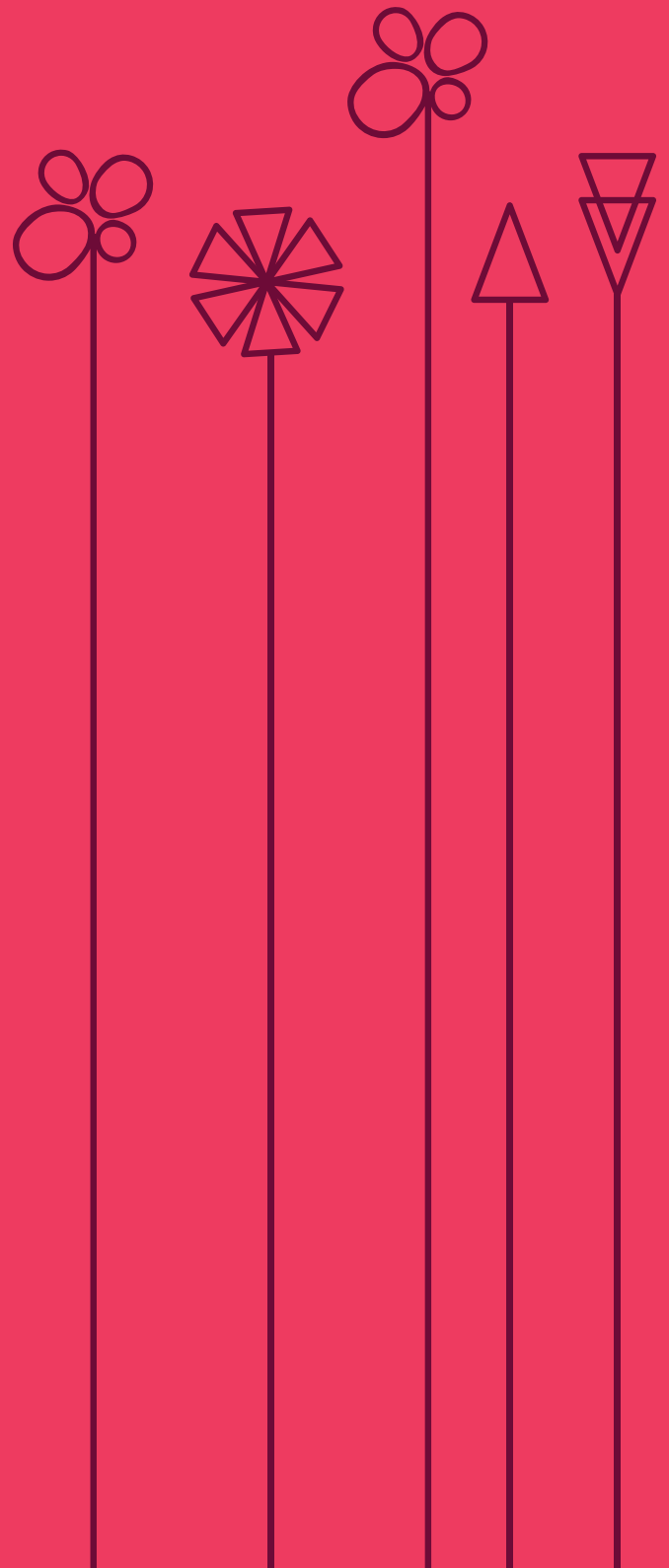
After Istanbul, we had realized the need for doing more intra-regional work but what stopped us was that our spaces began to be closed due to political repression. We needed to talk about queerness, knowledge production, historical movement structures but we did not have the space to do it in our region. And then the Forum in Bahia gave us the space to sit down together once again, ease some of the tensions that had emerged because of the counter-revolution processes in our countries. In that Forum, the mainstream NGOs were no longer there. Our region was less represented but

that was also because travelling had been made harder given the political situation. Still, discussions on WHRDs² and a regrouping of Lebanese, Palestinian and Egyptian feminists continued to happen because we were able to meet at the Forum. There was no regional alternative as everything was closed.

And, staying true to its best tradition of never settling for a comfortable status quo, the 2016 Forum made these MENA feminists, who had challenged their elders, to now feel challenged by issues they had not addressed. With honesty, Sara reflects on that and also expresses a hope for the Forums of the future to help them navigate these new questions:

The 2016 Forum opened up a lot of questions on our understanding of racial tensions within MENA: looking at our colleagues who went to the Black Feminist Forum we realized that we had not created a space for them. We understood and were told that the notion of Pan-Arabism hides existing racial tensions and issues that hinder the progress of some of our colleagues because of their colour. We could not do much about it because organising is becoming more and more difficult due to the increase in closing spaces for movements ... But this realization that we do have blind spots as a MENA movement, has informed our work even if we don't yet fully know what to do about it... In spaces like the Forum we can learn how to address and never again silence these issues. These are delicate conversations that require being face to face, taking the time to understand and deconstruct things together. And we want to do it. ✨

**Coming Out at the
Highest Point in My Life:
The Black Feminisms
Forum**



4

Many participants experience the AWID Forums as a unique space of freedom where they are embraced and celebrated as they are. In a world where even the most privileged feminists often find themselves not fully fitting in, for those whose identities are criminalized or otherwise condemned in their everyday contexts this experience of freedom and celebration can be deeply transformative (and restorative).

The story of how OluTimehin Kukoyi – a first time participant – experienced the Black Feminist Forum (BFF) and the AWID Forum in Bahia (2016) powerfully illustrates this.

OluTimehin is a writer and lives in Nigeria. She is a feminist and active in the feminist and other social justice movements in her context. She submitted a workshop proposal for the BFF on “Writing for Social Justice”. Her proposal got accepted and she was granted a scholarship to attend both the BFF and the AWID Forum that took place immediately after.

“(The BFF-Forum experience) is at the core of what I describe as the highest point in my life – it was different from what I knew as ‘the world’ at the time and so close to the world as I imagine it should be. It was like being able to live inside your imagination. Galvanizing. A spiritual experience. I was blown away – the BFF was the biggest event I ever attended, and the Forum was double the size of it”, says OluTimehin.

How a feminist Eden is made

At the BFF, OluTimehin experienced an epiphany that changed her life. But before telling that part of the story, let’s hear a bit more from OluTimehin about what the magical ingredients are that create a space where those experiences can happen.

“It felt like ... if you believe in the Bible ... an Eden: a place of peace, a place of rest, where you don’t need to be looking over your shoulder. We live in a world where we are constantly thinking about bills, safety, how to keep a roof over our head, how to avoid being abused. A world that is very different from the BFF and the Forum.

Of course, it was not perfect – there were logics of exploitation, domination that seeped into personal relationships, but that was the exception rather than the rule. And there were sessions where all that was called out as unwelcome, done unconsciously or not, it was never excused. People who had those behaviours were told that everybody should be made safe in the space and they should check their unconscious biases”.

Organisers committed to break and transform the exploitation logics of the world at events like the AWID Forum is one key ingredient for success. But it is not the only one. OluTimehin also highlights others:

“The resources provided for translation, for education about issues that you might not be aware of or fully understand – like the labour movement, domestic or sex workers, farms, mobility needs, people with different kind of disabilities, art...

There was a value put into those who create beauty and put it in the world just for the sake of it – while what we usually see is that only art that can be commercialised gets valued. In the Forum there were messages or beautiful representations about people who were in the space along with drums, yoga, theatre, meditation, make-up...”

Changing course

And now we come to the best part of the story, the moment when OluTimehin dropped her old skin and came out (in more senses than one) of the Forum as a new being.

“I had an epiphany at the BFF – I was aware of being ‘non-straight’, that was how I used to describe myself to friends as a joke. It was a survival mechanism – I had had sexual experiences with girls when I was a teenager but then never talked about it. It was like a shadow experience.

And then there was this conversation where Queer women were talking about their lives – and it hit me that I could relate to that because I was one of them!

That completely changed the trajectory of my life. Until then, I was a feminist advocating for ‘nobody to be left behind’ – sex workers, trans people, everybody. That came from an ethical conviction, not from my personal experience: I do believe human rights are for all people.

But then, at the BFF, it became personal as I realized I was queer!

I went back to Nigeria, and then my writing and advocacy became more explicitly queer. That was beneficial to me and to the Queer community that I work with here. Nigeria is a very classist society – queerness is in the shadows and then the people who come out are either from lower-income communities, who quickly have to get out of their home because their families and communities reject them, or the well-known ‘professional’ LGBT activists. It is very unusual here to find a Queer person who is middle-class or up but not an activist, and who is out. There are just a few of us.

It is a very repressive environment; we are all dancing on a very fine line. But we have each other and we are creating our own community where those who were thrown out of their homes can find support.

Living in this context, safety is a big issue for me. And it is very different from what I experienced at the BFF and the Forum. The fact that the Forum was a world where all kinds of people, bodies, labels were not just welcomed but acknowledged, accounted for, provided for was very transformative.

Our work is painful, thankless, and comes at a high cost – if we can find spaces of rest and rejuvenation and inspiration, we deserve them. We deserve to inhabit the world we are dreaming of even if only for a week every four years”. 🌸

A Strategy, a Market and New Voices: Indigenous Women and the AWID Forums



If your intention is to connect worlds, people have to meet in person. For those of us living in a culture rooted in the meeting of energies among human beings, that starting point is key. Technology makes that connection and trust-building much harder. You may talk to each other, but you won't have that trust. Spirituality and the connection between energies are things we usually don't keep in mind, but you meet a human being and you know if you can remain near them or not, and you know when it's time for you to leave. That is not something you can hear, you have to feel it.

Mónica Alemán

The Forum was a key space for the Indigenous Women's Movement (IWM) in its relationship to feminism. They applied the same strategy they used for the United Nations: to be present in decision-making spaces and to have a "critical mass" of participants with proposals. In that process, both movements were transformed: new voices and issues emerged within the IWM (particularly in relation to gender identity, abortion, and young Indigenous women proclaiming themselves feminists), and feminists started to change their discourses and practices around land rights and spirituality, they understood collective rights better, and included the IWM in their events and agendas. The Indigenous Women's Fund (Ayni) is, partly, a product of the broader "Where is the Money?" process that raised awareness about the need for resources specifically channeled to the IWM, and it was made possible by the network of relationships and knowledge that had been built through the Forums. In the Forums, the IWM also created an "informal market" by which many participants sold products that their sisters had made that had been collected for months before each Forum. Mónica Alemán and María Manuela Sequeira, from the IWM, told us this story.

Melting colonialism in the fire of Indigenous people's wisdom

This is a story of power, of a trajectory of intelligence and strategy, of a path guided by the wisdom of those who don't see the world from the mainstream high tower. As Mónica tells us, the story starts before Indigenous Women got to the Forums, in the follow-up to the UN Conference on Women held in Beijing where most feminist groups failed to understand the meaning of collective rights and were only willing to advocate as feminists for individual rights.

"The point was defining what Feminism meant: we said it could be intercultural and plural, incorporating a community perspective. For us there was no contradiction: if each of us is doing well, so is the community. We did not see any dichotomy there".

Twenty years ago, in feminist spaces culture was seen only as a tool for oppression, but for organised Indigenous women culture meant exactly the opposite, as Mónica explains:

"For us, culture could be an element of resistance and of liberation. There was a need (for feminists) to understand cultural rights from a different perspective. This has to do with

re-thinking models of democracy and economic sustainability, with territories guided by Living Well (*Buen Vivir*) where you can have your life plan, your local government and bring back ancestral knowledge”.

Back then feminists also saw themselves as very removed from spirituality, but Indigenous women said that you could be a feminist and hold spiritual beliefs. While nowadays this may seem obvious, back then those who wanted to bring their spirituality to feminist spaces met strong resistance.

Internal processes, firm steps

In hindsight, Monica reflects:

“For us it was important to feel rejected by the feminists – it was bad but it was the start of what you can see today as an organised transnational feminist Indigenous Women’s movement, with a pretty effective agenda before the United Nations (UN) and in spaces like the AWID Forums”.

What Indigenous Women did was to get ready: “We decided that we were never again going to wait to be invited; that we were going to create a power equal to that of the feminists so when we talked again it would be as peers.”

And they set out to work, creating the Indigenous Women’s Caucus to do advocacy at the UN, a database with information on professional Indigenous women as a resource, and advocating with donors to sustain this work. Along the way they started to open up dialogues in the Forum and other AWID convenings where they found “feminists who did want to listen, learn and meet with us”.

Once the allies were identified, the Indigenous Women started to advocate for feminist spaces to incorporate their perspectives: they managed to get voted to the AWID’s Board, joined the Forums’ Planning Committees (“so we would not wait to be invited to speak at a panel, but rather we would design it”), coordinated their efforts very well, and occupied the space. This initiative was started by Latin American

Indigenous Women and through meeting their sisters from other regions in the Forums and other spaces it became more transnational.

They also had to demolish biases and change perspectives. In Maria Manuela's words:

“Our struggle, our mandate is to change that paradigm of Indigenous Women as vulnerable because we acknowledge that even within the Feminist movement some colonial patterns persist and there is a bit of a ‘poor them’ attitude. In the AWID Forums we had the opportunity to change those paradigms whenever we sat in those sessions with such a diversity of feminists in the room, to tell them what we do, and to build relationships”.

Reciprocity

The notion of reciprocity as an essential way of life is intrinsic to several Indigenous cultures. It is the “ayni” in the Andean cultures, the “aguyje” of the Guarani or the “Toj” sign (nawal) of the Mayas, among others. For Indigenous cultures, reciprocity has a deeper meaning than in English or Spanish – it is a way of acting as part of a community. Reciprocal influences among Feminist and Indigenous Womens' Movements not only result in concrete changes but are also a way to learn how to live together as a community. Mónica describes how reciprocity operated between the IWM and feminism:

“It was a coming together, we influenced each other. As we got more and more involved, that helped many voices that had been silenced within the Indigenous Women's Movement to emerge, like those of younger and more radical women. For us the Forum helped us to understand liberation theory and for a new kind of Indigenous activists to emerge: those who were LGBT, those who proclaimed themselves feminists with an ease that we did not have before, those who support abortion. That pushed the Indigenous Women's movement to open up those dialogues”.

Among the Indigenous identities that became more visible within their own movement, and elsewhere, thanks to that openness, were the *muxes* (an Indigenous gender identity from Oaxaca, Mexico, that goes beyond the gender binary). Amaranta Gómez Regalado, who is *muxe*, was the first Indigenous gender non-conforming person to be part of an AWID Forum planning committee¹.

1 Amaranta was part of the Content and Methodology Committee for the Forum that had to be cancelled because of COVID (2021)

In current feminist discourses and practices on land rights, on the relationship to the environment and other living beings with whom we share the planet; in feminist critiques of extractivism and mainstream development models – all elements that were not central to the feminist movement twenty years ago – Indigenous Women find traces of this coming together and the resulting mutual transformation.

As happened to other constituencies – young feminists, Pacific feminists and Black feminists, in particular – through the Forums and other convenings organised as part of AWID's Where Is the Money project, Indigenous Women were able to better understand the world of philanthropy (and they were also among those birthing feminist philanthropy). In those spaces they acquired concrete knowledge, tools and contacts that, like María Manuela says, “stayed with us like seeds that then started opening up and growing”. Out of those seeds – combined with others that Indigenous Women picked up as they were walking through different advocacy and activist spaces – sprang the Ayni Fund in 2009 that co-invests in projects led by Indigenous Women around the world.

To share and to come together

“The AWID Forums are very rich spaces, very diverse. They allow for movement-building, dialogue and intermovement conversations. Those have been important contributions for us, and, as International Indigenous Women's Forum (FIMI/IIWM²), we value our alliance with AWID” – says María Manuela.

What is there in the Forum that allows this coming together and these transformations?

The joy that is shared at the Forum forges relationships and broadens perspectives. It is that joy that drives victimization away – converting the strength of one community into the strength of many. And the artistic languages that have a place of honour at the Forums make it easier to understand other realities, and to communicate one's own.

2 The IIWF is “a global coordinating mechanism for Indigenous Women to reach consensus on a common agenda, a common voice and a shared political stance, even though we come from all over the world”.

One way in which Indigenous communities affirmed their presence at the Forum – while also making those spaces part of their economy – was through the sale of artistic pieces and everyday objects that Indigenous Women had prepared and collected for months in advance. In how many homes across the world is there, right now and thanks to the Forums, a piece of art made by an Indigenous woman artist that the owner of the piece has never met and from a community she will never visit? 🌸



We could not have unearthed these stories in such depth and with such warmth without the feminists we spoke with.

Thank you for your generosity of time and spirit.

Amina Doherty, Awa Fall Diop,
Charlotte Bunch, Clau Corredor,
Claudia Sancam, Djamilla Toubet,
Elena Reynaga, Everjoice Win,
Flora Luena Santos Rodrigues da Silva,
Geeta Misra, Jac s m Kee, Jamila Abbas,
Janet Price, Jessica Horn,
Jurema Werneck, Justine Masika
Bihamba, Laura Inter, Lucy Garrido,
Lydia Alpízar, Maiga Djingarey Ibrahim,
María Manuela Sequeira,
Matilde Gonçalves (Tidinha),
Michelle Reddy, Mónica Alemán,
Mónica Enríquez Enríquez,
Morgan Carpenter, Nancy Natilson,
Nani Zulminarni, Nicky McIntyre,
OluTimehin Kukoyi, Peggy Antrobus,
Perla Vasquez, Pramada Menon,
Purity Kagwira, Sara Abu Ghazal,
Shareen Gokal, Tania Duarte-Díaz,
To Tjoelker, Toutou Ahmed Jiddou,
Vinita Sahasranaman,
Virisila Buadromo, Zelal Ayman.



awid

www.awid.org

