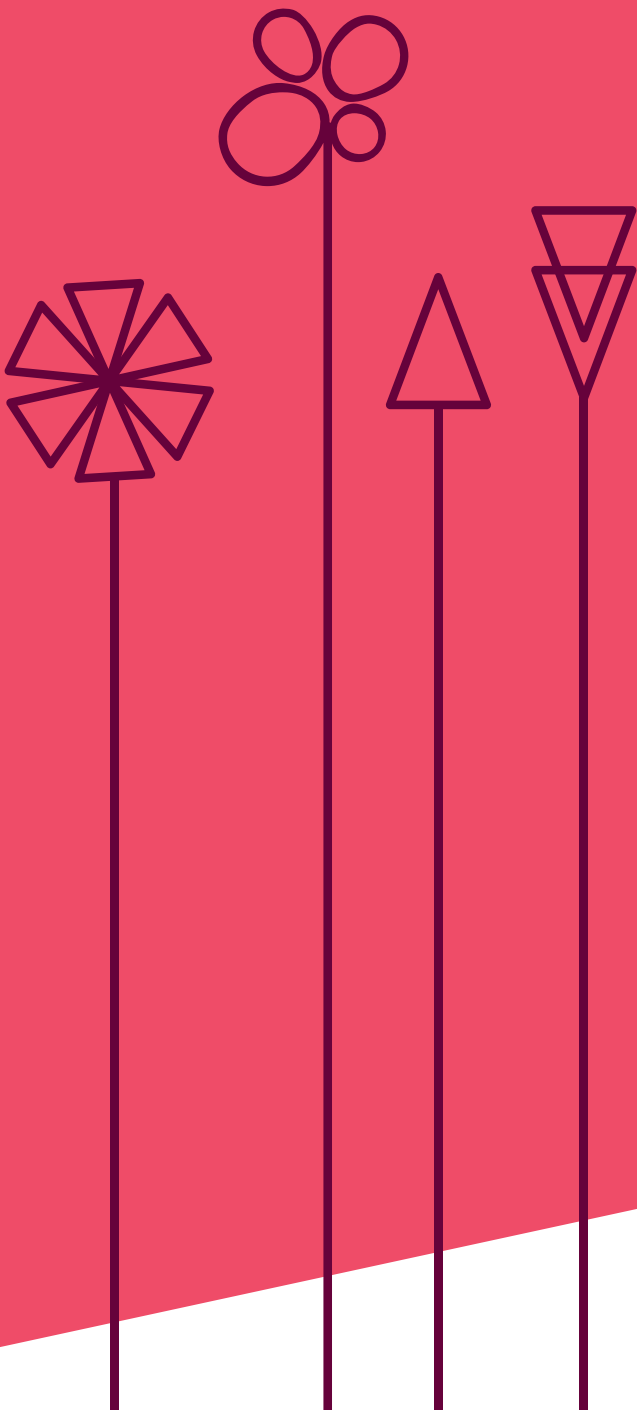


Coming Out at the Highest Point in My Life: The Black Feminisms Forum



Tales from the
AWID Forums

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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”. 🌸

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