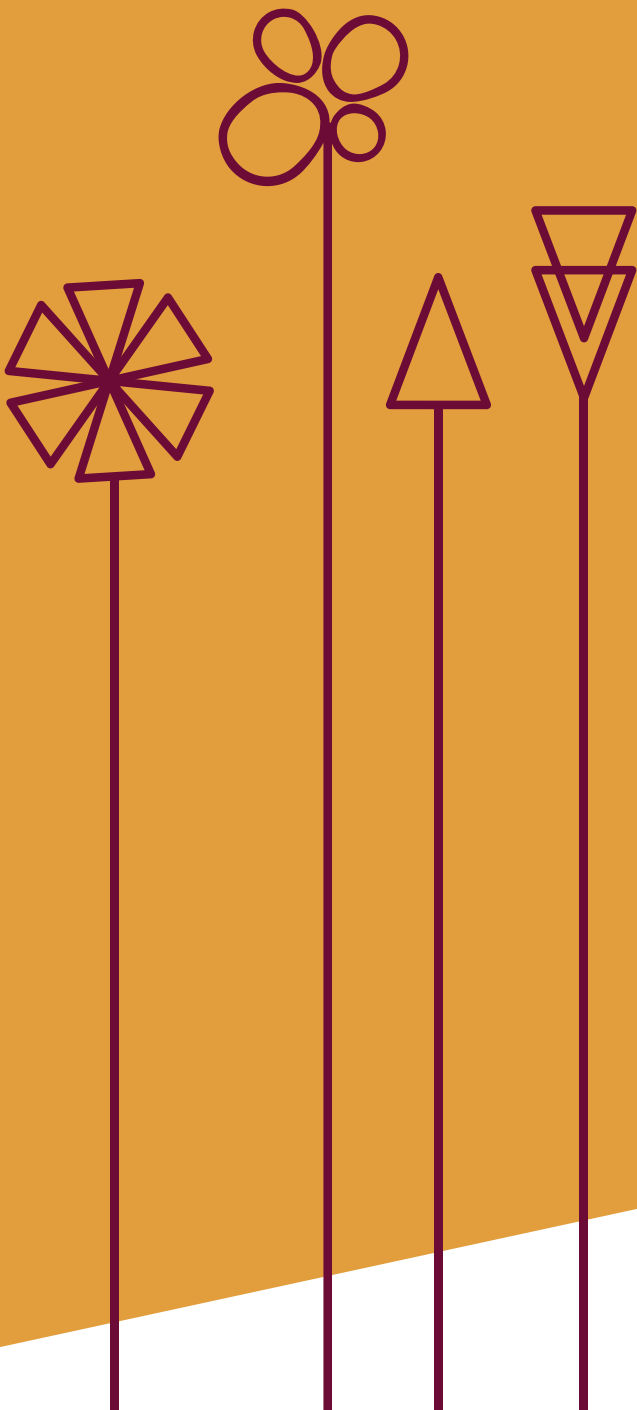


A Strategy, a Market and New Voices: Indigenous Women and the AWID Forums



Tales from the
AWID Forums



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? 🌸

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



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