The POWER of Movements

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Women Organizing and Transforming the World

“Rage and refusal are not enough”
Presentation by Geetanjali Misra, India

Good morning everybody. I am Geeta Misra. I’m the president of AWID and the executive director of CREA. It’s my pleasure to welcome all of you to the 11th AWID forum in Cape Town: The Power of Movements. I want to start with a word. A word that was born in South Africa, where we are gathered today to talk about the power of movements. A word that evokes one of the most monumental struggles in the world – the struggle against apartheid, or the system of racial segregation that was in place in South Africa for almost 50 years.

The word I want to open this AWID plenary with is “Amandla” – a Xhosa and Zulu word that means “power” and when accompanied with “Aheitsu” (“Amandla Aheitsu”) means power to us, or “power to the people.” These are words that had the power to shift power, like other words that come to mind.

“Azaadi” – the Hindi word for freedom – is another such word. It was the rallying cry for India’s struggle for independence from the British, and is now part of the women’s movement in India, where I come from. Of course, words do not bring about social change by themselves. But, as the British playwright Tom Stoppard once said, “Words are sacred. If you get the right ones in the right order, you can nudge the world a little.”

I’d like to evoke the power of movements that have nudge the world a little by sharing some of the popular slogans we associate with them. These slogans are not just words. They represent the claims of people fighting for social justice on various fronts:

- Workers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!
- Make love not war
- The personal is political
- Women’s rights are human rights
- Women unite. Take back the night.
- My body, my choice!
- Peace me safely
- Love is a human right
- Silence = Death
- We’re here. We’re queer. Get used to it.
- Good girls go to heaven. Bad girls go everywhere.
- Don’t talk to me of sewing machines. Talk to me of workers’ rights.
- Yes We Can!
- Another world is possible

As these slogans tell us, social movements are rooted in fighting a diversity of oppressions and injustices. Social movements can be local, national, regional or transnational. They can spark off anywhere, and they can be seeded anywhere: on the streets, in shanty towns like the South African shack dwellers movement; in university coffee houses like the student movement against the Vietnam War; in workplaces like the Solidarity movement in Poland; in areas where people are being displaced by so-called “development” projects like the Narmada dam in India; or on the internet through sites like moveon.org which channeled global resistance and outrage against...
the war on Iraq. They can take place where there is democracy, in situations of occupation like Palestine, and in countries where there is no space to create a struggle. Women in Iran, for instance, started building a movement in the early 1980s when Khomeini’s regime had dismantled nearly all the rights that women had secured between 1979 and 1980. All they had left was the right to vote, but even in this small crack, they organized themselves. Disabled women in New Zealand and India have organized to make sign language an official language in those countries.

While a single act of resistance can spark a movement, it is not itself a movement. Movements are about collective claims.

In the public imagination, social movements are often associated with simple acts of resistance: women hugging trees in northern India instead of allowing them to be cut as part of the environmental Chipko movement; a black woman, Rosa Parks, refusing to give up her seat on the whites-only section of a bus as part of the American civil rights struggles; students going on hunger strikes in China to protest the murder of a sympathetic general secretary; anti-nuclear activists blocking vigil at radioactive sites like Chernobyl; protesters against HIV chaining themselves to fences so that they can’t be dragged away. While these acts of resistance become the public face of movements, the movements they are part of run much deeper. In this sense, movements are like icebergs: a bit of it visible on top, the rest of it held together as an invisible mass.

There are many ways to think about, understand and conceptualize social movements: as a vehicle for ordinary people’s participation in public politics, as a process by which we think and work but because she is not free to make her own sexual choices, she understands her political condition. When a lesbian woman says she can’t introduce her lover to her mother because of the straitjacket of heteronormativity, she understands her political condition. The good thing about political conditions is that they can change, and so can our social movements. When we move against asymmetries of power, about shifting power from the powerful to the powerless. But when social movements aim to shift power, they do so with the goal of equity in mind. The answer to the question left is not that we have made women powerless, but to ensure that women also have power. The power to make our own decisions. The power for social movements, and opportunities flow to us. The power to set agendas. But it is not enough for us to shift power outside of our movements. We need to ensure that power is shared within our movements today, movements do not become monoliths presiding over hierarchies of oppression. Whose struggles do our movements represent? Do they represent all our collective struggles, or those of the more powerful amongst us?

Which brings me to the last two things that all movements share: a belief in the power of many, not one. A belief in we and not just I. While a single act of resistance can spark a movement, it is not itself a movement. Movements are about collective claims. But whose collective claims are we talking about? Whose people’s movements? Can we think of a women’s movement without women? A labour movement without workers? An LBT movement without lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered women? A student movement without students? A movement? No.

Many of us enter movements through the organizations we work in. As feminist activist Srilatha Bhatwadi reminds us, organizations are sites from which movements are built and supported. But organizations, even though they are part of movements, are not in themselves movements. Movements operate at a scale that no single organization can operate at. Organize simply means that we belong to NGOs, here is a question for each of us: How do we locate ourselves? Do we see ourselves as part of an organization? Or do we see ourselves as part of a movement? Or as part of both? This is an important question because it relates to what we see as our final goal. Are we working on sexual harassment – or domestic violence or access to land and water or political action of collective claims on others, or as politics by other means – often the only means open to relatively powerless groups. When the African-American author Alice Walker says, “I have a rage in me to defy the stars,” she is talking the language and concepts of social movements.

But rage and refusal are not enough. The heart is not enough. The head must also be allied. This is the second thing that all movements have: a political analysis of oppression. When a Dalit or low-caste woman says she can’t love someone outside her own caste not because of love and respect for the woman’s culture, she is saying she must continue to dream big and be creative in finding new ways to work together on truly inclusive movements. We need to develop new forms of collective action that can help us advance women’s rights in a significant way in this 21st century. Welcome! Bienvenidos! Let’s welcome you to the 11th AWID International Forum on Women’s Rights and Development: “Transferring Power: Movements! On behalf of the International Planning Committee, AWID’s board and staff, I want to welcome you and let you know how excited we are at opening the forum today.

On the next four days, we hope to build together a space where we can all, in a candid and friendly manner, discuss critical issues for the advancement of our women’s rights agendas. Through plenaries, breakout sessions, dance, music, debates, workshops and much more, we will have the opportunity to learn from one another, to challenge one another and, most especially, to dream together about how to continue building collective avenues for action not only between us, but also with other social movements.

It is not a secret for anyone here that women’s movements have contributed to some of history’s most significant transformations, particularly during the last four decades. It is not a secret either that none of the changes that have been brought about since women’s rights agenda could have been accomplished without women organizing, mobilizing and pressing for these changes. These diverse forms of collective action, which we have used through time, have been effective so far. But a historic moment has come, and the context has shifted significantly in such a way that many of our strategies no longer seem to work, or don’t seem to have the same impact any longer. There are many reasons for this, but at different levels, there seems to be a stagnation in our organizing. Likewise, some of the successful strategies we’ve used in the past – particularly those around mobilization and grassroots organizing – seem to have been replaced by other activities and expressions. It is perhaps time to look back and see which of these earlier strategies should be reincorporated back into our political organizing.

We should also look sideways and learn from the diverse forms of collective action that are being used within emerging women’s movements that are full of vitality and wisdom. We must continue to dream big and be creative in finding new ways to work together on truly inclusive movements. We need to develop new forms of collective action that can help us advance women’s rights in a significant way in this 21st century.
Geeta and Lydia have spoken to why “The Power of Movements” is such an important conversation for us to be having at this particular moment in time. I want to tell you a little bit more about what you can expect from the discussions ahead.

What are we trying to accomplish? Under the guidance of our International Planning Committee, made up of 31 women from 21 different countries, we have tried to shape this forum around a number of different goals.

(First, we want a greater shared understanding of how we can strengthen our movements. Why is this important? As Geeta and Lydia have said, it’s because we believe that movements – that the collective, organized power of women and their allies – are crucial to realizing women’s rights. We also know that feminist and women’s movements are tremendously diverse, and that there is much to learn from those varied experiences as well as from the experiences of other social movements. We also want to come away with some ideas for how we might overcome some of the fragmentation within women’s movements, pushing ourselves to re-think how we link across sectors, issues and identities. We hope to identify elements of a shared agenda, to find common ground in our vision of the changes we’re trying to achieve in the world. Can this vision, this broad political agenda, be a common platform from which we build solidarity across the many issues on which we work?

We also want to generate insights into effective ways of working multi-generationally, that value contributions of all ages and ensure visibility and engagement of young women and girls, as well as of women from different backgrounds. Against that backdrop, we want to generate a renewed sense of energy and inspiration – and on that point, there’s not much more to say other than look around you ... The energy in this room is amazing and inspiring.

So how do we hope to achieve these goals? As Lydia said, this is really a collective process, and the results will depend on each of us. Ultimately, the insights, the knowledge that is constructed here, are only possible thanks to what every one of us brings and offers into the space.

We will have a rich diversity of voices in the plenaries as well as in the sessions, as you’ve no doubt seen in the program book. The plenaries aim to provoke and stimulate, to spark ideas, to help us hear some critiques, and insights, of movement experiences that will push us all to think about our own organizing. Tomorrow’s plenary will reflect on some of the internal challenges and dynamics in our movements that need to shift. Sunday will be a conversation around the strategies we are using to organize even in very adverse contexts. Finally, we’ll come together to close the forum with some reflections in the plenary on what we’ve heard and learned, and what that tells us about the future of movements.

We hope to identify elements of a shared political agenda, to find common ground in our vision of the changes we’re trying to achieve in the world.

The sessions will expose us to a dizzying array of experiences and ideas – the most common complaint we get about the forum is that there’s just too much going on. But at the same time, there is overwhelming interest and so much to share. We received over 1,000 proposals this year for only about 160 session spaces. On this point, I strongly encourage you to attend at least one session that would appear to have little to do with your routine work, whether it’s on a different issue, or from a different region. I have often heard from participants that those are the sessions that they find most valuable.

So who is here today? Who are we sharing these conversations with? This is the largest AWID forum in our history, with a total of almost 2,200 participants registered. We’re still seeing who’s shown up to get the final numbers, but right now I can tell you that of those registered:

- Forty-three percent are from Sub-Saharan Africa, including 11 percent from South Africa
- We have about 10 percent each from North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Western Europe
- Six percent are from South Asia and another six percent from East and Southeast Asia
- Six percent are from the Middle East and North Africa

Creating a Caribbean Sisterhood

On attending the AWID forum I was able to connect with a group of Caribbean women who I will be working with from now on. I’ve always felt alone at forums on my issues as our Caribbean issues are separate. But at the forum, they always seem to be together. Last year I was not effective. This time, AWID had a Caribbean space where we were able to engage, thus creating a Caribbean sisterhood which we will be able to develop more.

The AWID forum has made it possible for me to view life from a wider perspective. I have seen and heard of the other issues of my sisters and better understand a few struggles that I didn’t know of previously. I have grown, matured and will be transforming all I have learned in my work as an activist. Thanks to AWID I was able to re-unite with others I met prior to the forum and reconnect with self. And thanks to the “power of body movements” session, I was able to reconnect with me, thus making it possible for others to connect with me. I came to AWID an angry, bitter, sad individual and left a more calm, hopeful, positive and opened person.

- Women’s Rights Activist from the Caribbean

The forum gave me a view that I could not have gained elsewhere

“The forum gave me a view that I could not have gained elsewhere – the view of the range and richness of our diversity across many countries and across various sectors, not as one movement but as many movements happening all at once, challenging patriarchy and capitalist exploitation in many voices and tongues and deploying repertoires of strategies, knowledge and experiences. It has inspired me in many ways than one, to have touched base with so many sisters from all over the world.”

- Women’s Rights Activist from Southeast Asia

“Plenary 1: Women Organizing and Transforming the World

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What are we trying to accomplish? Who is here today?” Presentation by Cindy Clark, USA

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The POWER of Movements HIGHLIGHTS OF AWID’S 17TH INTERNATIONAL FORUM ON WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND DEVELOPMENT

FULL AUDIO TRANSSCRIPTS OF SELECTED FORUM SESSIONS AVAILABLE ONLINE AT www.awid.org
Welcome everyone. I was asked to situate this forum and its theme, The Power of Movements, in an African context and to say why movements have been and continue to be important to us, and what impact they've had on the continent.

Despite recent setbacks, it is fitting that the AUWID forum is in South Africa because of the role that women played within the apartheid struggle. Geeta talked earlier about slogans, and I think we all remember that slogan, “When you strike a woman, you strike a rock.” There are many lessons from the anti-apartheid struggle as well as from all that has happened since. Many of us didn’t think apartheid would end in our lifetime. But apartheid did end, and it ended because of the power of movements, both here in Africa and elsewhere.

Why the focus on movements right now? I think many of us have been inspired—despite the many frustrations—by our engagement with the World Social Forum process over the last couple of years. I think it has provided a space both within the World Social Forum itself as well as in debates that happened afterwards nationally, [where we] vocalized our own critique of the way in which women’s organizing and mobilization has evolved. But although this focus on movements seems to be new, or seems to have gained more energy over the past couple of years, it really has been there the whole time.

I want to focus today on some African stories to talk about the successes—which also raise their own challenges—as well as the way in which movements’ organizing and mobilization, I would like to talk about women’s organizing and mobilization in four different phases.

First, of course, was the phase of the anti-colonial liberation movements (the phase between 1940’s, 1950’s and 1960’s). There were many examples, all across the continent, of African women leading in traditional religious or spiritual resistance to colonialism. I think here for example the prophetess, Ne Katlili wa Merza of the Girama in Kenya, who led her people in an uprising against the British colonialists. Then there were the African women allied with the political associations. I think of Mary Wanjiru, a woman who upon the arrest of Harry Thuku of the Kikuyu Central Association, said that if the men could not lead in protesting his arrest, she would. She was one of the first women shot down in the protest against that arrest. And of course there were African women who worked with and in the armed struggles. There was a field marshal, Muthoni, of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, the Mau Mau. Women played many different roles in the armed struggles—not just feeding the fighters as it’s often presented—at great personal cost. My own organization supports many of the female detainees of that struggle in their search for reparations.

The second phase was post-independence, from the 1960’s through to the 1980’s. We saw national women’s organizations often allied with, or explicitly linked to, ruling political parties. We saw the growth of immense numbers of community-based women’s groups all across the country. Many focused on income generation and women’s livelihoods. We saw African women in academia and the arts begin to question women’s space within nationalistic struggles, and to begin to express their own identity as African women, which was often at odds with cultural interpretations and nationalist readings of our history. We saw the beginning of Pan-African feminist engagement with the rise of pan-African feminist organizations—the first one being in the 1970’s, the Association of African Women in Research and Development. We saw also, during this period, great engagement globally.

Of course, we all know Africa hosted the third World Conference on Women in Nairobi. In 1995, it’s important to point out that this conference took place just three years after our coup d’état. There was very little organizing at the time, but Kenyan women came together across all kinds of divides.

The thing was what we refer to in Africa as the second liberation, the movements for political pluralism all across the continent. In this phase we saw the rise of autonomous women’s organizations moving from service delivery to advocacy on all kinds of fronts. We saw women play very leading roles within the democracy, governing, and opposition, and, as such as well as within the emerging opposition political parties. I think here of Wangari Maathai, who we all know, and her struggle to prevent public spraying of a great personal cost. I think of the mothers of political prisoners (whose work led to the creation of the organization, Release Political Prisoners) who protested using traditional forms of protest in a very difficult political context. In this period, the move from income generation and micro-credit strategies to a focus on national political economy and the beginnings of attempts to work on gender budgeting and on questions of structural adjustment, and later on post-structural adjustment poverty reduction processes and development financing, including questions of debt, investment and trade. Which brings us to the present, quite post-second liberation period in the new millennium, but deciding in fact that the second liberation has not still been achieved.

Yes, we have seen the rise now of new organizations within the women’s movement—organizations addressing questions of gender identity and sexual orientation, which is extremely difficult to do and deadly in some contexts. They are finding solidarity within the broader women’s movement in Africa, which is new—on the basis of questions of equality as well as the struggle for reproductive rights. The question is, what did we get from this immense panorama of organizing and mobilization?

I want to focus on two really critical gains for us. First is the question of legal guarantees and protection at the regional level. [In the aftermath] of the movements for political pluralism we saw a new impetus for regional integration. The new African Union’s Constitutive Act, the protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, which is a legally binding human rights treaty, and the Solemn Declaration, are all extremely important regional tools for all of us to use, to advance the struggle for equality on the ground. [The second is the increase in women’s] political participation. We have seen of course the first female president in Africa, in Liberia, and over 50 percent political representation [of women] in Rwanda. I’m just going to point out that; over the participation of women in Rwanda. And about 30 percent in other countries including South Africa and Uganda, thanks to tools such as affirmative action and proportional representation systems.

But, we are at this meeting knowing that these gains in terms of just numbers are exceptions rather than the rule. We are here knowing that we have yet to translate to [meaningful change] on the ground. We are seeing persistent, protracted conflict in areas where we thought peace agreements had been concluded: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Darfur in the Sudan, Northern Uganda. In all of these conflicts, the forms of sexual violence wreaked on women are extreme, horrifying and seemingly uncasing. We are also seeing real crises in democracy.

I come from Kenya and I won’t reiterate what happened in Kenya earlier this year, but suffice it to say the economic situation in Zimbabwe still has to be resolved and there is a democratic crisis, I would say, even here [in South Africa], even though there may be a crisis of public costs. We’ve seen an economic growth averaging about seven percent across the continent. But inequality within countries on income grounds, on regional grounds—which are always experienced either in terms of ethnicities or religions—and on gender grounds are now so clearly a question of security and stability that equality is finally on the public policy agenda. And we know that inequality will worsen given the seismic global shifts we have seen in this year—from food, to fuel, to the economic system.

Our struggle is not just about women, not just about the lowest common denominator. It is about maintaining a vision to move forward and galvanize around.

I want to conclude by pointing out what this means for all of us. I think more than ever it means that our struggle is not one about the lowest common denominator. It is about maintaining a vision to move forward and galvanize around. Geeta spoke earlier about the need for a political agenda that is based on an analysis, a rigorous analysis of oppression. And I think the lesson from—forgive me—Barack Obama’s campaign, about which much has already been said and much more will be said, [is] that our vision must not alienate or consistently be based only on our victimization. We can enable and we can inspire most profoundly through hope rather than fear—and by giving a sense that all of us are able to participate in the making of a different future.

So yes, we have to acknowledge and analyze rigorously our oppression, but we also have to put forward the best of our strategies [so that we can] move towards a new day. I would just conclude by saying, I think the democratic and economic crisis that we are in provides an opening, an opportunity, and the question is whether we are ready to seize that opportunity through the movements which we all belong.

We can inspire most profoundly through hope rather than fear Presentation by L. Muthoni Wanyeki, Kenya
My name is Mijo Kim. I am a woman with disabilities in an electric wheelchair, as you can see. It is a great honour to speak to you on behalf of women with disabilities all around the world. I appreciate that AVID [has given] attention to the issue of the women with disabilities. They also have helped and encouraged women with disabilities to participate in this forum. Thanks so much.

I am not asking women’s movements to incorporate women with disabilities. I am on this plenary to remind you that we are already here.

I would like to say that disability issues are women’s issues, and that the movement of women with disabilities is the women’s movement. I want to begin by asking you a couple of frank questions. What does disability mean to you? Does it mean something strange and unfamiliar, pitiful and poor? Who are the women with disabilities? Are they just people with disabilities to you, or [are they] women living in the same world as you live in, as women?

The United Nations estimates the percentage of the population with disabilities to be 10 percent of the 6.5 billion people throughout the world. [That means] there are approximately 325 million women living with disabilities in the world. However, despite these significant numbers, policies accommodating requirements and desires of women with disabilities are almost non-existent. Responding to this bleak reality, the UN refers to us as “hidden sisters.” Issues of women with disabilities are now considered by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and as a result, women with disabilities have not been active recipients of the benefits generated by related policies in each country.

Why have women’s movements recognized these issues as part of their agendas, when they are so closely tied to women’s rights? It is because women have assumed that disability issues belong to someone different from them. Why aren’t women and men with disabilities accepted as women? It is because many activists see only the disability and not the woman.

Women with disabilities have been rendered invisible not only in women’s issues but in disability issues too. Women with disabilities are more likely to be discriminated against than men with disabilities. There is also gender discrimination within the disability community. [Many disability rights activists do not] expect women to be leaders [in the disability rights community].

Sexuality — or asexuality — is also [a big issue for us]. It is widely documented that women with disabilities are typically seen as asexual. The body of a woman with disabilities is not considered a sexual body. Before we married, my husband’s friends asked if he was really willing to give up sex for the rest of his life. It never occurred to them that I am a sexy woman. (Applause and whistles.) Thank you! It is not enough to just describe the gender inequality (experienced by) women with disabilities as simply a problem within the disability community. The disability intersects with gender inequality and produces severe forms of discrimination against women with disabilities. But it’s not [as linear as] adding a “disability” factor onto a “gender” factor. Rather, it’s a totally different, harder-to-distinguish disability experience.

We have to understand the particular circumstances of women with disabilities (in order to) build alliances.

During the 16 Days of Activism it is with great sadness, fear and outrage that we remember the atrocities of violence against women. In South Africa we remember Gugu Dlamini, who was stoned to death for disclosing her HIV-positive status in Khayelitsha 1998. We send our messages of solidarity to “Khwezi” who was confronted with chants such as “burn the bitch” outside the rape trial in 2006, and has since been forced to live in exile in fear for her life. With devastation, we remember our sister Sizakele Sigasa, who was found dead last year with six bullet holes in her head and collarbone, her hands tied with her underwear and her ankles tied with her shoelaces. She was violently tortured and probably raped before being killed by her friend Salome Masogale in Soweto.

Across our borders we reach out to Alual Koch and her sisters, who fought in Sudan’s civil war from the age of 11. We hail the bravery of nine-year-old Arwa in Yemen — sold and married against her will and her sisters, who fought in Sudan’s civil war from the age of 11. We hail the bravery of nine-year-old Arwa in Yemen — sold and married against her will.

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Across our borders we reach out to Alual Koch and her sisters, who fought in Sudan’s civil war from the age of 11. We hail the bravery of nine-year-old Arwa in Yemen — sold and married against her will — and we stand together with Zimbabwean women arrested and beaten for opposing a regime.

It’s with a sense of despair that we remember women around the world whose violations fall under the category of sexual harassment. My husband’s friends asked if he was really willing to give up sex for the rest of his life. It never occurred to them that I am a sexy woman. (Applause and whistles.) Thank you!

Let me talk about women’s shelters for example. In the case of a woman with a hearing impairment, she can’t even get a counselor, and her case can’t be registered without a sign language interpreter. In the case of a woman with a severe disability, she can’t even get into a shelter if there are steps or if the bathroom isn’t accessible for her. Do you really think this is still a “women’s shelter?” The idea is not to make separate shelters, but to ensure that we all know how to build spaces that are inclusive of all women, including women with disabilities. Yet even among women with disabilities, there are questions about whether we should seek alliances among women without disabilities.

A couple of weeks ago we gathered alongside 2,200 other women’s rights activists from around the world and shared our concerns and what feminists are doing around the world.

The Association of Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) holds an international forum every three years and for the first time it was being held here in South Africa. Colourful, passionate, analytical and emotive sessions took place over the four days with activists from 144 countries.

On the second day South Africa’s 1 in 9 campaign hosted a march of women’s rights activists from South Africa and across the globe. The march drove forward as a purple sea of women — women with disabilities and without the power to make decisions about their lives who have been denied an education and are now illiterate, who are stoned to death, who have a heavy burden for 42 years — her child, me, who got poliomyelitis when I was 11 months old. My mother’s whole life has been [devoted to] my life. She has lived as a woman with disabilities, like me.

Secondly, 80 percent of women with disabilities have acquired disabilities [because of] disease, accident and environmental factors. Disabilities are no longer an issue only for persons [who currently have] disabilities. Many countries suffer from malnutrition, famine and war or conflict situations, [circumstances that often lead to] people becoming disabled. These circumstances mostly affect women and children.

[Third,] jobs related to care-giving are for “second-class citizens” and generally assigned to women. Most of the people working in the sex industry are not paid. For the aged and people with disabilities, are women. They are asked to work hard for low pay. In developed countries, jobs related to people with disabilities are often done by immigrant women who have few other options, and who, as a result, are vulnerable to unfair treatment or sexual harassment.

Why isn’t women’s movements recognized these issues as part of their agendas, when they are so closely tied to women’s rights? It is because women have assumed that disability issues belong to someone different from them. Why aren’t women and men with disabilities accepted as women? It is because many activists see only the disability and not the woman.

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Sexuality — or asexuality — is also [a big issue for us]. It is widely documented that women with disabilities are typically seen as asexual. The body of a woman with disabilities is not considered a sexual body. Before we married, my husband’s friends asked if he was really willing to give up sex for the rest of his life. It never occurred to them that I am a sexy woman. (Applause and whistles.) Thank you!

It is not enough to just describe the gender inequality (experienced by) women with disabilities as simply a problem within the disability community. The disability intersects with gender inequality and produces severe forms of discrimination against women with disabilities. But it’s not [as linear as] adding a “disability” factor onto a “gender” factor. Rather, it’s a totally different, harder-to-distinguish disability experience.

We have to understand the particular circumstances of women with disabilities (in order to) build alliances.
I believe we have to grow our movements. We will strengthen them through empathy, by listening to one another, and by better understanding our situations. Look at this 11th AWID forum. There is a desk to support participants with disabilities. There is the support of volunteers and personal assistants, accessible transport, and women and girls with disabilities are organizing sessions and speaking on panels. [But] there is still more to be done even further improve the next AWID forum. I am not asking women’s movements to incorporate women with disabilities. I am on this plenary to remind you that we are already part of women’s movements. Women’s movements have to look inside, at our own context, and listen to minority women’s voices. The international movement of women with disabilities is strong and rapidly growing. In 2006, the UN General Assembly approved the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which has a stand-alone article – article six – on women with disabilities. This convention establishes the principle that women and girls are entitled to gender equality. This is strong language against violence against women and girls with disabilities. Countries that ratify this convention will be expected to then act to implement it. This year, 2010, I think is the last year that the convention is expected to have an effect. It opens a new horizon for us, and I want to share this important news with all of you, with the women at this forum.

From this moment, I will try to find our voice in women’s issues, and I very much hope you will remember issues of women with disabilities in your workshops. We can do a lot together. Everything is placed in context together. I hope when you go back to your home, your organizations and countries that you will remember that the issues of women with disabilities are core to women’s movements.

I’m sure that most of you came here because you want to network, because you want to meet other organizations, because you have a pitch to make to the funders, because you want to learn about other things happening. [You want to] get as many pamphlets as you can and go back home. But I am asking you today to [take] a very creative approach to this forum, and to make it really personal. Because personal connections change our lives.

You know, my life is not going to change if I get to know one of your projects or programs, or if you tell me "Hi, I’m from this organization" and start telling me about everything you do. [But] my life will change if I meet you as a woman, and you meet me as a woman, and we share this bond and this experience, and we ask each other personally. We ask about feminism that is personal to us. That’s what I think is the coolest thing about this forum, that we can talk on a personal level. I know there are 2,000 participants, but we need to make these personal connections. Because there’s nothing professional about feminism – I don’t like the word professional. And I don’t like how we deal with it very formally as if it’s this distant concept.

So, creativity is in talking to ourselves, and listening to ourselves, and also in comforting each other. Because all the forums who came here and I are very tired – raise your hand if you’re very tired as well. See, we’re all extremely tired and exhausted, and this is the place where suddenly all of that makes sense right? We come here and we watch these videos and we listen to these speeches and we think OK, now I remember why I did this in the first place. This is the reason why we need to talk to each other, and to get to know each other as human beings, as women. Now the “U” is for “unity” – and unity is very important. But I think that getting together as a group of us is free until all of us are free. And I thought that was such a perfect quotation – that none of us is free until all of us are free. Because we will see this overwhelming diversity in terms of the topics and the issues that are covered. We’ve got incredible forces against us – you all know this. We’ve got institutions and the systems that we fight against. Women are all against us. All these systems, visible and invisible, are against us. And the only people we’ve got [to address these forces] are the people sitting right here in this room. If you look around you, these are the people who will support you, who will help you, who will fund you, who will give you the resources that you need. This is the room that can change the world.

You see I believe in feminism. I’m in love with the word feminism. I believe in feminism like some people believe in god. I believe that [feminism] is fluid enough to be reinvited and reconstructed and debated and discussed until four in the morning. New things can be constantly brought into it, and new things can be kicked out of it. But the great thing about feminism is that we can play with that. And the great thing about movements is that a movement doesn’t really belong anywhere. It’s everywhere – at the same time – like god! It’s nowhere specific, but it’s everywhere. And the great thing is that nobody, not even the most powerful person in the whole world, can kick you out of the movement. Which is great! Nobody can come and say, “I denounce you, you are kicked out of the movement.” We create the movement ourselves – it’s not an NGO, it’s not a program, it’s not a coalition, it’s not a network.

But at the same time I also believe very strongly that there are some rules of feminism that you can’t mess with. You know, like Sarah Palin claiming she’s a feminist. There are some issues about feminism that you cannot mess with, and one of these issues is that there cannot exist feminist movement without the lesbians. There cannot exist a feminist movement without transgendered people either. Otherwise, it would be called a homophbic movement, or retrogressive movement. We don’t want that. We want that everyone can come and G...
It is an honour to be here. I am here as a result of the roads you have travelled. Sisters, leaders of the world, I welcome you today and pay tribute to the road walked by our women ancestors. I welcome you today in honour of the struggles we have lived. I welcome you today with deep emotion and a spirit for change.

I will begin by acknowledging the presence of my indigenous sisters from all parts of the world who are here today, of my Afro-descendant sisters, and of my Nicaraguan, Latin American and Caribbean sisters. Today we honour the memory of thousands of young, old and wise indigenous women from the American continent who are actors and promoters of profound structural reform. They are working to change the relations of power in our countries so that all of us – indigenous, Afro-descendant, mixed blood – can enjoy the rights for which our ancestors struggled.

There are thousands of experiences of indigenous women who sacrificed their dignity and their lives so that today we can be here with you.

On behalf of indigenous women, I would like to acknowledge our sister Lydia [Alpizar] who is a visionary for promoting, as the central objective of this AWID meeting, the visibility and potentiality of women’s struggles around the world, and for promoting dialogue among women from diverse movements, women who have founded their work on ancestral struggles. Indigenous women have come here with renewed hope to share our experiences with you. We are the products of the struggle of Domitila Chungara, an indigenous woman who, together with other miner sisters and brothers in Bolivia, began in 1963 to create the foundation for a profound transformation of the Bolivian state. They articulated the class, ethnic and gender struggle of the Bolivian indigenous communities. Today they are working to transform the relations of power in a Latin American country.

We are the result of the struggles of Dolores Casacung, an indigenous woman from Ecuador. She was wise, a teacher, and a loyal defender of the struggle to end the discrimination that her people suffered. She was an advocate of the first programs of bilingual and inter-cultural education. These programs were among the first to consider culture and identity as intercultural foundations for the promotion of respect and co-existence among different cultures.

We are here to follow the steps of our older sisters, Rigoberta Menchu Tum from Guatemala, Mima Cunningham from Nicaragua, Tarcila Rivera Zea from Peru, Commander Ramona from Mexico, and Nina Pacari from Ecuador, among many others. They taught us that, as women, we are bearers of the rights achieved by the struggles of all women. However, we cannot enjoy such rights if the collective rights of our peoples are not recognized. As indigenous women we can only enjoy our rights fully if the rights of all indigenous peoples are also recognized.

The struggle for our rights has been fundamental. There are thousands of experiences of indigenous women who sacrificed their dignity and their lives so that today we can be here with you. In my Miskita community, in the autonomous region of the North Atlantic in Nicaragua, I remember some of these women. Vivi Dilia is one of them. She knew of medicine. She had been the midwife for almost all the women of the town. She knew of plants that she learned from her mother. She learned from dreams, and she speaks with the spirits who today guide the vision of my people. When she was 14 years old she had to leave her community, which at the time was affected by a lack of food, because the collective territories were being occupied by a transnational banana company dedicated to monoculture. But Vivi has (since) regained her dignity. She lives by her wisdom because we achieved multiracial autonomy with the revolution in the 1980s.

Today, however, women in Nicaragua, like in many other countries in our continent, confront regression and threats in the exercise of our rights. The rights of women, like the rights of indigenous peoples, continue to be the product of political negotiation. We cannot allow the political persecution and harassment that feminists and other social leaders in Nicaragua are experiencing, (perpetrated) by a government that self identifies as “leftist.” Violence and repression against women who struggle for and defend human rights are forms of control that governments utilize in many countries to block our way and negate our rights.

As indigenous women, we also come here to share our capacity for intergenerational dialogue. As young indigenous women we want to follow the teachings of Doña Virgilia, a spiritual leader of the Mayan people in Guatemala who used to say that indigenous women need to deal with topics such as sexual and reproductive health, gender, and social justice. She used to say that we need to be transparent and share the fact that in many of our communities there are diverse sexual options, respecting the mission that all human beings have according to their respective natal. The same used to be said by Amaranta, a Mestiza Zapotec woman active in the struggle against HIV.

We have come here representing the International Forum of Indigenous Women, which articulates the indigenous women’s movement of North America, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. We have come here conscious of the economic challenge we confront today, knowing, however, that the women of the world have come a long way.

Feminists and women who struggle for our rights opened the path on which we walk. Many of you have been our teachers. Today we tell you, however, that we can boost our struggle if we find ways to work collaboratively to move the movement forward.

We are here to take a step forward in the continuing construction of a feminist movement that is diverse and that has principles like solidarity, interculturality, diversity, and that has an inter-generational character. Sisters, the challenge is on the table, and change is in our hands. Thank you.

“I am not sure yet what exactly the forum will yield, but I am particularly the forum about women’s situations around the world, their resources and different ways of thinking – gave me some food for thought. To see our work in Israel/ Palestine in global perspective is not something I have a chance to do every day. Because national discourse is terribly eminent in our environment, it was also a rare chance to succeed in re-conceptualizing our work and understanding the extent of women’s movements around the world. These two axes – women’s rights and conflict-related issues – cross in our work, but then again, the socio-political context we work in is extremely restrictive. Being away, surrounded by feminist activists from all over the globe and talking about what we do and listening to others, enabled me to have several rare moments of “change in framing.” I think it is extremely valuable and no doubt it will bear consequences in the ways I and my friends and colleagues talk and think. On top of that, I gained some new perspectives on our situation and the way we conceive human rights and women’s rights work, ways of thinking to realize to what extent, operating in a semi-liberal context where human rights in constantly manipulated by the state, that we sometimes – maybe too hastily – did not see or criticize at human rights and fail to distinguish between the larger human rights project and the ways it is being manipulated.”

Women’s Rights Activist from the Middle East/ North Africa

“I moved myself mentally and attitudinally.

“As I listened to the vibrancy and determination, most notably from the young women and the African women, I moved myself mentally and attitudinally. I was moved even more firmly towards the understanding that it is the collaboration of allies, partners and equals that will achieve change. I learned [again] I fear that I don’t have to do everything. And I learned that many of my sisters still need to be challenged, because disabled women will be there as part of every other group, but marginalized even among the marginalized. My strongest change is to recognize the effort necessary to make those women visible.”

Researcher