Good morning everybody! Welcome to the 2nd day of the AWID forum, and to what I hope will be a really provocative and interesting plenary. My name is Jessica Horn. I’m a member of the African Feminist Forum and I’m also on the IPC of the AWID forum. I welcome all of you.

I think very often in our activism, we focus on what I’d call the politics of the outcomes. We focus a lot on envisioning the world we want to see and thinking about the world outside. But the truth of the matter is that patriarchy has been around for generations. It’s going to take generations to overthrow. Our victories are often few and far between, or over the long term. Sometimes you may not even see the victory that you are looking for in your own lifetime. Or you might see a victory that you’ve won being reversed. So, in this plenary, what we’re trying to do is to focus attention to what I’d call the politics of the process – which is the question of how do we wage the struggle for women’s rights and women’s freedom?

I think, globally, we’re starting to realize that the work of women’s rights is really taking a toll on women’s rights activists themselves. It’s only now, in the past five years, that we’ve really had big campaigns that are looking at issues like the safety and security of women’s human rights defenders, the well-being of activists. It’s interesting, because the feminist mantra is that the personal is political. And yet very often in our political practice, we actually fail to reengage and encounter the personal.

What we’re going to be doing here today, through a range of different perspectives on a range of different issues around feminist activism and movements, is to look through and engage some of those questions of the politics of process. I heard someone once say that being critical is the most important part of being loyal. What we’re hoping to do today is engage in a form of critique that is actually an act of love and an act of loyalty.

Before diving into the issues, I’d like to take a moment to reflect on who’s here in the room. The forum participants gathered around you – here to talk about how to strengthen our collective power – include every generation of activist in the women’s movement. Younger or older, we are all here because we understand the importance of this conversation, and we are ready to make it happen.

Many of you are familiar with and supportive of the push to recognize the unique contributions that different generations of activists bring to our movement. Today I want to focus on what lies beyond recognizing our intergenerational differences. Our next challenge is to create the effective cross-generational relationships that are the building blocks of a strong movement. A multi-generational movement is critical to the fight for women’s rights not simply because there has to be somebody to continue the work that has been started, but because a powerful movement – one that is able to respond to the changing nature of the threats to women’s rights – needs to draw on a varied array of methods and strategies for organizing. It needs to capitalize on the different ideas and perspectives of all its activists.

I’m sure no one would disagree with that. But it seems like many people in the movement, younger and older, aren’t quite sure about what that looks like in practice. To get there we have to stop looking at each other based on what age we are. We need to be more careful about the casual generalizations we make about the role of certain people in the movement based on what age they are. I won’t repeat all the age-related myths we throw around here, but let’s just say that not all young activists are energetic and creative, and older activists aren’t all power hungry divas.

The danger of these myths is that they discourage us from sharing power between generations, and they lead to ghettoism of activism involving different generations that are not connected. My background as an activist is mainy in working with young feminists in youth movements. When I joined AWID in 2006, I had no idea what to expect. I hardly said anything to anyone my first year because I was so overwhelmed by the way everywhere I went in my work, everybody seemed to know certain people, and organizations and networks. Everyone was welcoming each other as old friends, and I felt like I was sitting on the sidelines.

When we have achieved intergenerational solidarity, we won’t come to the discussion labeled as the older activist or the youth representative. We’ll be there as allies ready to give, listen or act based on our own abilities. Of course we’re always going to identify most closely with our own age group, and we don’t have to agree with each other all the time. Sometimes we need our own spaces to just be with our peers, and sometimes we need to claim spaces from others. But overall, we need to come together and push together as a movement.

Not all young activists are energetic and creative, and older activists aren’t all power hungry divas.

So what do we have to do to achieve intergenerational solidarity? It’s a big mouthful. Firstly we need to view it as a collective responsibility and part of all of our every day work. This isn’t just the job of the youth program or young women. Working across age groups doesn’t require specific expertise either. Intergenerational solidarity basically just means ensuring a diversity of voices in the room and then listening to and validating each other’s perspectives in all that we do.

Secondly we have to turn our different generational perspectives into stronger, more effective strategies rather than divisive tensions. The different priorities and agendas of each generation are shaped by the political, social and cultural context of their times. As a movement we are very conscious of the way this changing context affects our work. The natural consequence of that is that women of different ages will experience issues differently and therefore prioritize the agenda for action differently. But we allow this to become a point of confrontation.

For example, in a range of spaces from the Ugandan Feminist Forum to the regional meeting for the Middle East and North Africa, it’s clear that younger feminists place a heavy emphasis on the bodily and sexual issues that underpin women’s rights struggles, and are
advocating an agenda that goes far beyond traditional sexual and reproductive health and rights models. This gives us a choice. It can either lead to personal and political tensions, or become an opportunity to advance our thinking together.

This is related to a third point, which is that we need to look beyond our own generation and start sharing our knowledge in a more inclusive way. Why is it that the most common way we seek out new voices is by inviting people in rather than reaching out? In my work I see organizations trying to engage with young women, not by learning about the work that those young women are doing, but by inviting them to come and join pre-planned activities.

For example young women garment workers in Cambodia, one of whom is here in this room, are doing amazing work, mobilizing and working with young women to increase community awareness of worker’s rights across the country. They are using methods like a decentralized information network that passes information between villages. They also put together a girl band that travels around to rural villages where there isn’t much entertainment, singing songs and staging karaoke parties.

Although they are invited to join meetings with local and international NGOs, they say that they feel intimidated by formal meeting spaces. They also explain that they are very limited by cultural values that expect younger women to listen and learn only. In response to this, some older labour rights activists, internationally and locally, have reached out to young women by going to visit them at their drop in centres, participating in their activities, and brainstorming ideas with them before larger meetings.

Sharing knowledge across generations also means getting better at understanding and learning from past experiences. Our movements have incredibly rich histories and in many cases by stories (oral [oral]) are stored only in the minds of those who lived them. We need to come up with new and dynamic ways of sharing this knowledge that recognizes that this process is not a one-way transfer of information from older to younger generations. Women of all generations are involved in making our history. Whether you are experienced should be defined not by your age but based on what you have done. ARROW in Malaysia has responded to this by promoting a talented 26-year-old to the position of senior manager. Acknowledging age and power dynamics, the executive director commits a portion of her time each week to working directly with the younger generation to think through ideas and talk through strategies.

It's time we stop equating age with experience. The executive director of AWID, Lydia Alipaz, started as an activist when she was 17 years old. She often says that although she is very young, she is a veteran. Not all young people are newcomers. Who leaves the question, what are we doing for newcomers to our movement who aren’t young? How are we supporting them? How are we ensuring that they too can become strong activists in our movement?

Finally, working effectively across generations requires us to think about how we use power and what forms of leadership we recognize. Building a multigenerational movement requires us to put in place skills and power-sharing processes. Some organizations are approaching this by appointing both a younger and older person to manage the agenda instead of an older person who is supported by a junior assistant. The two staff members have authority to manage the program together and divide roles and responsibilities between them. This not only brings in new ideas it ensures that leaders listen and respond.

I’m sure that the overwhelming interest in the AWID forum this year is because we can see the advancing threats to women’s human rights, and we know that we need to go beyond our organizational methods and think through ways to really nurture our feminist social movements. A failure to meet the challenge of bridging the age divide is a weakness we just can’t afford. This isn’t just about getting in the room together. It’s about a real search for ways to rally knowledge and perspectives together.

The objectives of the African Feminist Forum are to develop an autonomous space for African feminists to analyze our realities, to develop our own priorities and strategies, to speak for ourselves, to build and strengthen solidarity amongst us, and to address the sustainability and growth of the feminist movement both in institutions and in individuals. No more burn out please. We’ve had now two Feminist Forums (we’re quite young): the African Feminist Forum in Accra in 2006, and in Kampala in 2008. And although it’s young it’s had three babies already: the Ghana Feminist Forum, the Uganda Feminist Forum and the Nigerian Feminist Forum. How did we start?

Though we’re young, we had a very long gestation period, including a quite painful miscarriage in which there were bitter arguments about what constitutes feminism and/or African feminism, and/or if there is more than one feminism. And which included during that process [instances of] back-biting, appeals to regionalism and nationalism, accusations of the same, intolerance, personal attacks, and so on.

Some of the survivors of that very painful process felt that it raised the question of how not to let our own language and values about democracy, inclusion and transparency be used against us to undermine the critical work we want to do, while at the same time upholding those values. We felt the way to do that was to develop clear principles – as Nadine said yesterday – the ground rules of what we felt should [constitute] African feminism. And so we developed the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists. We call it the Charter for African Feminists not because

“We paid a lot of attention to principles of inclusion and diversity.” Presentation by Ayesha Imam, Nigeria

The 11th AWID forum in Cape Town (November 2008) was the third forum in which I have participated. Over the course of these last six years, the AWID forum has become a part of my personal and professional development, a probable product of a continuing interest in partnering and a bumpy history of doing it well. I leave the forum rereading and inspired to seek equitable partnerships.

One of my lasting impressions of this forum is of the session on women’s empowerment and the role of men. Bursting with the presence and buzz of interested attendees, the session had to be moved to a makeshift room, where panelists stood on chairs to project their voices over the large crowd. The engaging speakers talked about the importance of looking at gender relations, of deconstructing power and analyzing the structures that create inequality, and of “female masculinities.” Male panelists spoke about why gender justice matters to them and provided thought-provoking reasons and strategies for engaging men in gender justice.

This forum’s theme on movement building was personally interesting to me as I watched how such diverse participants interacted with one another. Though participants attend out of common interest in gender equity, the diversity of language, ethnicity, nationality, class, age, gender, sexuality, religion (to name a few) abounded. A recurring theme of inclusion and exclusive space emerged throughout the conference. I wonder if, in some ways, my personal tracking of the last three forums also reflects the evolution of inclusiveness within AWID’s base and role in movement-building? Might men and others who do not fit squarely within the women’s movement be the next frontier of AWID’s inclusivity challenge? This last question is personally significant to me, as someone whose work began in a feminist organization, and now does gender work from inside an international development organization.

I came to this year’s forum to listen for better ways in which my current organizational home can be a stronger ally to the movement. This hope was met

- By Theresa Hwang, USA
we think the values are peculiar to Africa but because it was developed by and for us. [One of the principles is] that feminism is publicly self-defined. We wanted to reject the fear of stigma, and analyze the concept for its use for us in defending and reconstructing women’s rights in Africa. We’re always going to be called names, so the politics in how we name ourselves is important.

Some of the survivors of that very painful process felt that it raised the question of how not to let our own language and values about democracy, inclusion and transparency be used against us to undermine the critical work we want to do, while at the same time upholding those values.

Secondly, we felt it is a profound insult to claim that feminism was imported to Africa from the West. So we reclaim and assert the long and rich tradition of African women’s resistance to patriarchy in Africa, which we are pursuing with the African Feminist Ateliers Project, which we launched yesterday.

Third, we felt that it’s important to recognize the intersecting systems of exclusion, marginalization and oppression of patriarchy, class, race, ethnicity, religion, global imperialism, heterosexism ... there are many, and they work together. We have to address them all. Fourth, [we confirmed] the principle of freedom of choice and autonomy regarding bodily integrity issues, including reproductive and sexual rights – particularly the right of women to choose whether or not she wants to have an abortion, and the right to choose one’s sexual identity and orientation.

In addition to those broad theoretical principles, we thought it was also necessary to address principles of how we can work, live and bring into practice the raw divisions that we have. So we talked about ways of using power and authority responsibly – for example, not having managerial attitudes (towards) younger men, or to domestic workers, or to any women or men over whom one has power. We talked about accountability to women, to the movement, and to institutions as well as to donors.

We talked about the space to support, mentor, nurture and critically engage with each other, including being open to receiving criticism, which is a crucial principle for inclusion. We decided that we would use those as principles for inclusion. We made the decision that women who accept the principles of the Charter, and who, to the best of our knowledge, walk the talk in their daily lives – professional, institutional and private – were the people who should be included in an African Feminist Forum in their individual capacities. The Nigerian Feminist Forum adopted those same principles.

So, in those two forums (the Nigerian and the African Feminist Forums), the organizing groups, the working groups, went through a process of having to verify and get to know better women who were nominated as participants, [in order to reach a] consensus by the group that yes, we really believe that this person does walk the talk and accepts the principles. By the way, I should mention that the Charter was circulated with a letter of invitation so that people knew what they were committing themselves to before they came to the meetings.

Nonetheless, we found that both the African Feminist Forum and the Nigerian Feminist Forum still had to deal with people who were, at best, uneasy about sexuality issues. In the Nigerian Feminist Forum, this surfaced after a performance by participants of the Vagina Monologues. Some [participants] were hostile, especially around issues of sexual orientation. That was also the case in Ghana and Uganda, perhaps even more so in Ghana than in Uganda, they decided that they would use the forums to deliberately reach out to women who are not necessarily identifying as feminists, in order to try to create more feminist activists.

So how did we deal with these issues?

First of all, we surfaced the tensions, and we tried to make it clear that homophobia and principles of non-inclusion were not acceptable. We tried to talk about ways of directly addressing contradictions between feminist principles and other beliefs and values within ourselves. We clarified principles of solidarity, and we ensured that people who were present who were lesbian or sex workers or transgendered or had disabilities could speak for themselves, with the support of other feminists at the meeting.

I have to say, at the end of the Ugandan Feminist Forum and the Ghanaian Feminist Forum, they were able to adopt the Charter – which was great. But the challenge remains: how do we use the Charter practically for ensuring accountability to its principles? What’s our responsibility to our sisters, who we feel are not living up to their stated principles? We have over a thousand women when we hear of somebody who has perhaps not been treating people well? And obviously we still need to do more about our own internalization, but we have made progress.

We also paid a lot of attention to principles of inclusion and diversity, given that we didn’t have enough money to invite everybody who was in fact a feminist by our criteria.

So we developed an interlocking set of criteria for invitations to the African Feminist Forums and the Nigerian Feminist Forum – which also included diversity of sexual orientations, experience and expertise of that person as a resource person, regional and country representation. We also agreed that a diverse group of women should be involved in representing our women’s rights movements.

The principle of generational diversity was also important. [We paid] attention to the need to ensure balanced representation among participants. We had four age cohorts which were almost exactly evenly balanced: under 30s, 30-39, 40-49 and over 50s. After informal consultations, we took the advice of younger women and decided not to have special young women panels, but to ensure that all generations of women were represented on every panel and in every workshop. [We also] provided space for a young women’s caucus, among others caucuses.

We also had discussions about what mentorship means, and its relationship to age – not necessarily [related] – and the expectations and responsibilities of mentors and mentees. In addition we had multi-generational dinners which facilitated conversation: small groups sitting at one dinner table with the conversation facilitated by women of two different generations. In Uganda we had also a session organized by age cohort on what do we want our feminist movement to look like in five years, and how will we get there? We actually found in that case that there was absolute consensus among the four generations.

We reckoned that feminists are not only those who work with women on women’s rights, so we had a mix of professions and modes of engagement.

We also committed also to the principles of regional and linguistic diversity. We have over a thousand indigenous languages in Africa as well as four ex-colonial languages. We had to limit it to French/English translation of all the papers. More about discussing our home languages, but I think that’s a problem. We’re committed to inclusion of women with disabilities, and I’d just like to mention here that the Protocol to the African Charter and Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, which was drafted by African feminists, has specific provisions on the rights of women with disabilities.

We also paid attention to diversity of occupations and modes of engagement with feminism. We reckoned that feminists are not only those who work with women on women’s rights, so we had a mix of professions and modes of engagement: artists, academics, members of parliament, NGO activists, independent, non-affiliated people, self-employed.

And so, we moved from the African Feminist Forum in 2006 with 16 countries represented, no women with disabilities, no LGBTI persons, no sex workers – to 2008 where we had 26 countries represented, many more Francophone and North African participants, the stronger presence of lesbian women, some women with disabilities, some sex workers, and a stronger presence of women living with AIDS. The challenge now is that we are recognizing and working on is how to include those feminists who are not schooled, and who don’t speak in the ex-colonial languages. I think it is fair to say that, overwhelmingly, there is agreement that the African Feminist Forum and the national forums have produced more clarity and more feminists, and [have] helped to strengthen our strategy and tactics to make feminist political, social, and economic change. We have dancing, poetry; singing; we had a great debate; we had a trial where we critiqued the deficiency of the AFM through a mock trial in which the AFM was represented for the first time.

Importantly, the Feminist Forums haven’t been single stand-alone events. They’ve sparked initiatives that have carried on afterwards.

There have been protests to protect LGBTI defenders and people in Uganda and Nigeria. There have been interventions in different other fora. In Nigeria, the listserv of feminists has resulted in feminists forming a nucleus of campaigns as allies to fight against the indecent dressing bill, for the domestic violence bill. In Uganda there’s a network of feminist executive directors who meet monthly to provide support for each other’s analysis to each other. And in many countries there has been a taking stock of our engagements, a reaching out. There’s been [a] lot of support each other across the continent, which is much stronger than ever before.

However, I must say that crucial to the growth of all the Feminist Forums has been our way of organizing, which is to have working groups that work with strong and independent feminist organizations.

And I want to recognize those organizations publicly here: the African Women’s Development Fund, the Ghanian Network for Women’s Rights, the African Women’s Rights Network, the Zambian Women’s Rights Network, the Lagos Alliances for Africa, Baabob for Women’s Human Rights, and all members of the working groups of the African Feminist Forum and the Liberian, Nigerian Feminist Forums and the soon to be Kenyan Feminist Forum and Senegalese Feminist Forum.
The fight for reform has given much power to women’s organizations

Presentation by Rabéa Naciri, Morocco

I want to thank AWID for providing me with an opportunity to reflect on this time in our country’s history, and share with you all some information on this “post-reform” period we now find ourselves in as a women’s movement. I want to begin by providing you with a bit of background on the Moroccan context. We are in now what we like to call the “democratic transition” which started a couple of years ago. And although we are not sure how long it will last or where we are heading, we thought it would be important to share this reflection with you. The fight for reform has given much power to women’s organizations that are part of larger women’s movements, in the post-reform context. It has given them strength because for the first time, they are seen by both the public and the political elite as a force that can contribute to the implementation of a social agenda.

Dialogue on women’s rights has become a bit of a fashionable thing – and of course this is associated with many threats.

One of the main consequences of this reform, and of the democratic transition period, is that there has been a multiplication of feminist associations in Morocco, which is very positive (I will return to the challenges and issues of this). The first feminist organizations that were part of the first wave of feminism only existed in the large cities in Morocco. Today the feminist movement has diversified and covers most of the regions in Morocco, which is a very positive outcome. But it’s also linked to some threats and some challenges.

This dynamic reform process was very difficult and lengthy. Thousands of women marched in the streets, and we had some struggles with the Islamist movement and conservative forces. One of the consequences of these struggles was a diversification in the funds that were made available. Within just a few months, we saw funders from all over the world, all seeking to work on projects within the framework of the reform of the family code. But these funds arrive with a very specific agenda, which was one of the main impacts.

A second impact is that the reform brought with it an end to some taboos. We saw the emergence of “state feminism,” which means that the Moroccan government is now speaking about women’s movements, gender mainstreaming is being discussed. The Moroccan government is taking a lot about women’s rights, which in my mind is also a threat – I will get back to this.

Another impact of the democratic transition in Morocco was the emergence of a phenomenon that almost does not exist in other Arab countries: partnership between the state and civil society. This was very positive, public opinion, that civil society organizations are now working with the government of Morocco.

All this means that dialogue on women’s rights has become a bit of a fashionable thing – and of course this is associated with many threats that are weighing on feminist movements. There has also been an appropriation of the discourse, as the movement has become “respectable” – and this of course implies that we are facing new challenges today.

Allow me to share a bit of reflection with you. Twenty years ago, I remember a conversation I had with a friend in the movement. A decision-maker sat on us because we were asking for equality of women within the family unit. Such a thing today would be unthinkable. I do not say that I am regretting that we are no longer sat on, but I am pointing out a huge shift in culture that has taken place. Things have evolved so much today that belonging to a feminist organization has become something that is commonplace and is very well perceived. This is in turn has created some opportunistic challenges. For one, being a leader of a feminist movement today can open up certain doors. To give you an example, let us take the media and media coverage. The press and media in Morocco are very curious about what is going on in the women’s movement and our needs. Feminist leaders can be on television. We can appear in newspapers.

There is also another issue that has arisen since the reform of the code: career development. The influx of funds in Morocco – the public-private partnerships between the donors, the state and civil society – have created a number of new career development opportunities tied to the government’s need for experts. We call this the “triangular partnership” between government, donors and the donors. Because of this triangular partnership there are now opportunities for career development for women’s rights activists inside government that did not exist before. The government needs expertise that it does not have, and they are calling upon feminist managers for that expertise. I’m not saying that this is a mass phenomenon, but I am saying that this is one of the threats that we are facing today.

Another risk is that international organizations are poaching feminist leaders and managers who have the knowledge and experience that is needed by these international organizations. This is happening in part because Morocco is a relatively young country with respect to democracy and women’s rights, so there is a real lack of expertise and know-how.

All these stakes, all these challenges, are creating a context in which feminist organizations are being solicited to work on a multiplicity of projects and on the government’s agenda. This has created a new power struggle – a competition for resources, for power – and all this of course leads to a lack of time. Since the reform in 2004, we have not stopped running from one activity to the next, nor have we had the time or space to debate among ourselves the implications of this reform. Many organizations are now at the service of the donors or governments, implementing projects instead of it being the other way around. We are in a process that is putting us in jeopardy and forcing us toward NGO-ization. This process has been characterized by a severe shortage of time as well as competition between different organizations for good leadership.

This lack of time I’ve been speaking of makes it so that spaces for exchange, debate and critical reflection on this post-reform period are missing. What does this imply for a women’s movement that has won such a major battle? We have not had the time nor the opportunity since 2004 for discussion. When we speak of inter-generational debates and dialogue, how can we possibly expect organizations that are suffering from this severe shortage of time to have older leaders to train and work with young feminists? We need to make time to share the collective memory of the first-wave feminist organisations that I call the “big sister memory.”

To conclude I will share an experience with you. Two years ago, we tried to set up what we called “sit-downs” for the Moroccan women’s movement. We did so because we needed to create a space for debate, over and above the official projects and the specific strategies – free spaces without any stakes, without any power struggles. Spaces that are totally outside of the political agenda and the association’s strategies and projects.

We initiated this process two years ago – but of course we are facing many challenges, which is normal I think since the movement has now opened up and is extremely diversified, with associations from different regions of Morocco. That means that the debate of course is somewhat complicated. But I trust in the future. We’ve had problems recruiting young activists, but maybe it’s because we, the older generation, are blocking their path. I think that our hope lies in the young feminist organizations that are springing up in small cities and regions in Morocco.

I felt so much energy and power

“I have never left a meeting feeling so much energy and power.” This is my second women’s international meeting, and as I work with women’s movements at the grassroots level, I felt so much energy and power. It is very difficult to empower women if myself I am not empowered. The forum changed me positively, and I have seen the great importance of organized.”

- Women’s Rights Activist from Sub-Saharan Africa

I really thought things couldn’t get better

Wow! After an amazing day one at AWID I really thought things couldn’t get better...I was wrong. After the plenary on day two I was left with an interesting feeling... a feeling that as a man who is a proud feminist there was no need for me to find an excuse for being here amongst nearly 2,000 of the most amazing women’s rights activists from all over the globe. The fact that I believe with 100 percent of my being that feminism is in its infancy.

Former ANC MP Pregs Govender is officially my shore after empowering the delegates to take part in a “recognition session” that was nothing more than an internal earthquake that reflected the power of ourselves that translates into the power of movements.

As I leave the Convention Centre to join the One In Nine Campaign march through Cape Town CBD, the power of movements and the women AND men that stand proudly in solidarity with women who speak out is in the air. Viva The Struggle For Positive Change. Early tomorrow post: Wantcha de Mobokodo, You Strike A Woman You Strike A Rock!!!

- Tan Johnson, South Africa
"We embarked on this process to strengthen our being part of a movement"

Presentation by Morena Herrera Argueta, EL Salvador

Good morning. What I’m about to share with you all today is a reflection that not so long ago I shared with Lyvia. I’m going to try to summarize a process we undertook in El Salvador aimed at strengthening the women’s movement. My focus will be on the problems, bottlenecks and tensions that came out of that process, given that today’s plenary focuses more on the processes than on outputs or successes. But first, I want to give some background to help us locate the context in which this process took place. In 1992, peace agreements were signed, ending twelve years of civil war in El Salvador. Before this, very few organizations defined themselves as feminist, and feminism was considered a bad word. The word “feminist” had the connotation of being influenced by bourgeoisie ideologies or by American imperialism. At that time, women’s organizations were mainly concerned with human rights, conflict resolution and some specific demands related to women’s rights.

With the political transition after the war (not necessarily to democracy) there were a lot of expectations. We thought the transition was going to be a good opportunity for women. Women’s organizations developed a national platform for the first post-war elections. Additionally, after Beijing’s influence, we thought we were going to achieve political changes to improve women’s condition and quality of life. We grew as a movement, both in terms of numbers of participants and financial resources. But very soon these expectations started to crumble as we faced resistance from the government and the political elite – even when that political elite consisted of some of our former struggle comrades.

Something else that contributed to the crumbling of our expectations was the rise of fundamentalist groups linked to the Catholic Church. El Salvador was the first country in Latin America to approve a national holiday in tribute to “the unborn child.” Between 1997 and 1999, all non-punishable forms of abortion (there were three in total) were penalized, and the constitution was reformed to make it almost impossible to change this law.

As women’s movements and as feminist movements we faced the same issues as our counterparts in other Latin American countries. El Salvador was no different. We were affected by the logic of the feminization of poverty, the feminization of war, commodification of women’s bodies, gender violence, gender-based violence, and so on. Consequently, the gap between feminist NGOs and local and sector-focused women’s organizations grew even wider. These local organizations started to be considered by feminist NGOs as beneficiaries who were only useful when they needed to mobilize masses of people to the streets.

I should also mention that in spite of the increasing gap, we were able to maintain a feminist NGO association. El Salvador was created 10 years ago, based in the capital city. The Prudencia Ayala Association is frequently referred to as the women’s movement representative by public agencies and funders. In reality, only feminist NGOs based in the capital and a few independent feminists are part of this association.

It is within this framework that we decided to look inside and embark on a self-critical process to help us strengthen our analytical capacity and strategize as a movement. In other words, we embarked on this process to strengthen our sense of being part of a movement.

We reflected on our own self-censorship in confronting penalization of abortion, and we looked at how we marginalized the issue of sexuality.

I’m going to summarize what we did then. First we identified five sectors of feminist struggle and analyzed the conception, the practices and the strategies that we’d used during the last ten years in these sectors. Each feminist organization that participated in the process did so with the commitment of considering not only what they had done, but also what everyone had done in that sector.

The five sectors that we looked at were: the struggle against violence against women, the struggle for sexual and reproductive rights, labour rights in terms of free trade agreements with the United States which is very important in Central America (not because it is a benefit for us of course), support for women in terms of income-generation, and the strategies of empowering rural women. This initial process allowed us to recognize what different groups had done and also pointed to areas where we needed to do more work.

Another process, undertaken simultaneously, was to gather all of the publications and research and proposals that had been formulated from women’s organizations and women’s organizations during the same decade. We organized everything into a bibliography, with about 450 indices. We analyzed and classified them in different categories, using similar categories from another index that we used 11 years ago. This allowed us to see in which sectors the movement had continued to create more knowledge, and in which sectors the process was paralyzed or had not continued to progress, either because of a lack of systematic studying or because of changes in funding trends.

This process also allowed us to see the low levels of knowledge within and within our organizations about the work we and others were doing. For instance, we found that in one organization, one department could produce a document, and other departments in the same organization had no idea of the existence of that document. We also found out that we often don’t even read what we produce. Research reports and feminist, because feminism is based on an implementation process of a project. In the final weeks of the project, we published a report with our findings and then we present it, archive it or disseminate it. Publications and research reports have rarely been used to look inside our movement and reflect about our practices.

We did two more things during that process that lasted about 14 months. We undertook a self-criticism that allowed us to identify and name current problems in the movement. We also began to have more confidence in our reflections and started to think about strategies that could go beyond just carrying out actions together. We were able to recover and put back on the table some critical issues such as patriarchy and our critical view of the de-politicization of gender. We reflected on our own self-censorship in confronting penalization of abortion, and we looked at how we marginalized the issue of sexuality, disregarding its importance at explaining the oppression of women and as a tool to help us achieve our individual and collective liberties. It is on the basis of this self-criticism that we have begun a new dialogue.

I’d like to share with you the last part of this process. (Pointing to a slide) This map shows women’s organizations working at the local level. We analyzed and mapped this information and created an index with the 262 municipalities of the country. We also put together a directory of local grassroots organizations. Simultaneously, we also registered the reach of the work of feminist NGOs that are based in the capital and we have marked them on this map. As you can see on the map the municipalities that are marked are those where the feminist NGOs work. The areas that are white indicate there is no presence of these feminists NGOs. As you can see when we superimpose against women’s map on the first one, these two maps do not coincide.

This has allowed us to see the truth about the myth in El Salvador, which is that everything that exists with
"How can one talk about sisterhood and solidarity when we cannot openly address our own differences?"

Presentation by Lynnsay Rongokea, Cook Islands

The Kahikatea tree has a shallow root system beneath the ground. The roots form an intertwining mesh that provides the support to the tree to grow to great heights. [These roots symbolize] the intertwining of all women within the women’s movements, feminist movements, that are the heart of my talk today – a coming together of all of us to provide the support for this movement to allow this tree – this source of power, strength and life – to grow to great heights.

(Singing) Kia orana, Kotu katoa. Warm greetings from the Pacific to you all.

I am from the Cook Islands, which is, for those of you who don’t know, a small group of islands in the middle of the South Pacific. As an indigenous woman from the Pacific, I would like to acknowledge the power of the first nations of this land, and I thank the AWID organizers for giving me the opportunity to share my experiences with you and also for your attention. I must say that as a Pacific Islander woman, I feel honored and privileged for this opportunity to be one of the three percent representing the Pacific. The verse that I’ve just shared with you was a song by a New Zealand Poet, poet, music composer, and I thought that it would be appropriate for my discussion today.

About my network: the APWLD (Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development) organises events with 150 members spread throughout Central Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. The organization is dynamic and, like the cycle of life, ever changing. It’s multi-generational, with a diverse membership with different political, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, and different experiences, ideologies, life paths, and educational opportunities. Now, the challenges we face as leaders of our organizations is, how do we bring all these people and that [diversity] together? It’s not easy.

I came into an organization that was in financial crisis and fragmented. And you know, the comment that I got was, “What is a white woman doing here in credit and talking about Asia-Pacific issues?” My nose is too pointy; I’m the wrong colour. But I am a Cook Islander, and my Pacific Island sisters have asked me to stand up and share a lot of the commonalities that we have.

Every organization comes into a crisis at different stages. There are tensions; there are unresolved disputes. How do we address them if they are deeply engrained? [These tensions] have resulted in divisions within our organizations and within our movements. Some may never be resolved, but we must still work towards finding workable solutions.

Our movement is based on personalities, our relationships with other women, our commonalities and our differences. Hierarchies are built around personalities. We work within hierarchal structures to ensure accountability, transparency and efficiency. But these structures can also be counter-productive and create a power imbalance. We need to address the hierarchy of personalities, these small cliques within our organization who make the decisions. How many times have we heard, “we’ve got 150 members in our network but only five members responded to an issue.” Is that reflective to the whole 150 voices? Can we really say we’re representing the voices of the organization? Who made the decision? Who did we consult? Why is it the same people who are attending all the meetings? It’s always the same faces. We want to see new faces. We want to hear new voices.

We have seen how our enemies have internalized sexist values, judging and criticizing women in patriarchal ways. I’ve attended meetings in the Pacific where women nudge each other, roll their eyes. They don’t go anywhere.

I would like to work in an explicitly feminist and queer-positive environment; these things are important to me, and I would like to see them addressed.

I attended the 11th women’s forum hosted by the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID). It’s the first time that the event has been hosted in Africa and I have to tell you, the energy of the place was amazing. It was really inspiring to hear from and to meet so many women who are all working on work, particularly, whether this be in a feminist context or not.

I was very excited to meet women who are working in queer rights in Africa. I hadn’t seen any LGBT organizations in Kenya, though I know they must exist. Such organizations are frequently driven underground for fear of persecution, as in many countries, with the stigma and the silence against it is still strong. I was awed by the women who were working in countries that are so hostile to their presence, yet they persevered because they believe so strongly in equal rights for all people. They are not ashamed to fight for the right to love who they want, the right to be treated with dignity and respect, the right not to be beaten or killed simply for looking or dressing in the “wrong” way, or for holding (or god forbid) kissing their partner in public.

I think attending this conference has been very helpful to me in terms of realizing that in the future to address the issue. However, within our movement, we have been silent on the psychological violence and conflicts that go on within our organizations, between and among women, creating stress and affecting our mental health and wellbeing.

One of the questions asked was, “How do we address diversity in the work of our organizations?” [Perhaps] we should ask (instead), “How do we account for our own negative treatment of each other?” We say or talk in private, “Women, can be real bitches, condescending and arrogant.” Women hurt and humiliate another one and gossip. Good gossip is okay, it’s the malicious and mischievous rumours that are spread that I am talking about. Women fear other women.

I’ve stood in front of my own board and members and told them that there were rumours abundance about me, as well as about the performance of our governance bodies, and it was an issue that needed to be addressed. How can one talk about sisterhood and solidarity when we cannot openly address our own differences? We talk about the promotion and protection of women’s human rights and yet we cannot stand up and protect the woman we sit next to and work with. We need to be more open and honest. Rather than talk outside of meetings, we need to bring it into the open, into the appropriate venues and
I’m deeply honoured to be here together with so many women that I’ve learnt so much from, and from whom I’ll continue to learn. This year marks the 30th year of the women’s movement. I’d like to start with reading an extract from my book, Love and Courage: A Story of Insubordination. It’s an extract from a period when I was a trade unionist in the clothing and textile union, during the period of Apartheid.

On top of poor wages and working conditions, women often had to endure sexual harassment and strip-searching and were still expected to be sweetly submissive. Their reward was to be selected by the bosses as queen for a day, in the industry’s much publicised Spring Queen competition. For many women, a leader was a man whom they could look up to, not someone who looked like themselves.

Although women formed the overwhelming majority of workers in the industry, they seldom elected other women into leadership positions at the factory, regional or national levels.

On my return for the first workshop I organized for women leaders, everyone shared their ideas and images of women. I wrote their responses onto a large chart: “women are goddesses”, they “bitch and be more objective about situations that we are faced with. We all walk different paths in life and bring our different backdrops and experiences to the table. One can never truly know what the other is thinking. We are all a product of different times, different cultures, different familial situations and different relationships. Opening our minds and trying to see the other side, no matter what we think, should always be the first step we take when considering issues. We are all part of the intertwining mesh that provides the support for a tree to grow to great heights. Our role in that [support] depends on our own approach and our contributions to each situation.

Another well known saying from the Pacific is: “If a’ te mea nui o te eoe? E tangata, e tangata, e tangata e.” Which means, “What is the most important thing in the world? It is people, it is people, it is people.”

We are all walking the same journey together. We are supporting the same tree to grow. It is time that we turn to each other in the same spirit as we turn to those we have come together to speak for, and offer the same support and strength to our sisters walking our path. I thank you for your support and teachings, and I look forward to the discussions.

As I went back, I looked at various things and one of them was a chapter in my book, which is called “Elimination.” It is literally about a request that was made in the ANC underground for my elimination. We faced constant and always, constant all forms of elimination, and they begin to link one to the other. What does it mean to be loyal and to whom should we be loyal? The reason given for the request for elimination was because I was unassimilated. What does it mean to be true to ourselves and to be true to the other when, in our country for example, the president said, addressing women last week, that the way in which we should deal with teenage pregnancies is to forcibly separate the mother from the baby, and to leave the baby with the grandmother. The mother will not be allowed to return to the baby until she is trained, re-educated, etc. I’m paraphrasing. I’m sure someone can get the exact words.

What does it mean when the president-elect of our country says that these young women are having babies so that they can access the child grant, to do their hair and paint their nails? What does it mean for all of us in our country and across the globe? How will we stand in solidarity with each other? How will we stand in solidarity with each other? How will we stand in solidarity with each other? What will happen in the future with the most powerful way possible? Because what we are talking about is ways of reinforcing patriarchy, ways of reinforcing patriarchy, working within patriarchal systems and structures including our own? The process of recognizing different movements that I have been part of in this country [has] brought back a great deal of pain. The most painful retaliation for me was not the retaliation of the African National Congress, the hierarchical patriarchal structure, which was part of it. It was the reaction from those closest to me. It was of a sister saying to me, “you have betrayed the African National Congress, you have betrayed my movement” when I voted against the arms deal. It was of a sister standing up and walking when I began to speak, because I had resigned over the HIV-AIDS issue, and she was in agreement. It was about being written out of the history that people were compiling because I had dared to stand up against the position of those who were powerful.

Patriarchy interacts with all authoritarian systems: religious, economic, political, and social. It can be incredibly powerful and incredibly overwhelming.
misogyny. When it happens in one place and no one stands up against that, it goes unnoticed, and it spreads, and it spreads, and it spreads. So, how will we build that solidarity with each other?

I want to take a moment, and I’d like to ask you to do a little exercise. It’s a very simple exercise, but I think it’s one of the most important things. I’d like you to turn to the person next to you, to partner with someone for a moment. In this moment, I’m going to ask if you can all take a moment first to just sit with yourself, to connect deeply with yourself, to connect deeply to the love and joy and peace within your own heart. This session, the [description of it] says, “if we hold a mirror to our movements, what would we see?”

I’d like you to turn to each other and, without speaking, I would like you to see reflected, and to reflect back, that love and peace and joy in that other person’s eyes. I would like you to uphold in that mirror the most beautiful picture of that person in silence, with no talking, in absolute silence. You can give your partner a hug if you’d like (laughter).

One of the things we learn early on is criticism. We must criticize, and criticism is very important. But actually, something far more important is recognition. The simple act of recognition. It is the simplest act. It is the most powerful act. It doesn’t take any fancy technique or technology. It just takes our presence. In the years ahead in our country, and I think across the globe, in the challenges that we face, whenever we forget who we are, if we can take a moment and look into the mirror of each other and be reminded of who we are and who we can be together, I think we will be able to work very, very powerfully.

I think that all the things that I have learned in the women’s movement from 1974 until now, mostly in my country [but] in the last few years, outside my country ... the things that I have learned from my mothers, from my sisters, from my daughters [are all] about the abundance of talent, about the generosity, the massive generosity, about the humility, about the wisdom that women have shared ... about the clarity, the strategic abilities, the respect, the self-respect, the joy, the pleasure, the analysis, the organization, the mobilization, the love, courage, and insubordination. Thank you.

Once upon a time there was a voice. She wore blue jeans shaped lovingly / to the fine fat curves of her ass, the hold / strong smell of / her thighs. She loved / red and Motocross / and silver hoop / earrings, and anything black / for the most part. Peanut butter smell / of her sons’ small body. She roamed the asphalt / of West Oakland calling / for her mother / trying to remember / what her mother looked like. Her right hand pressed deep / into the hollow / just under her left breast / where she left an / she could not name.

You say: do you see me? Look – and tell me what you see.

I am looking at you now. The lovely tired / contours of your bodies. The heavi ness / of your bellies, bellies that have opened children, done the work of building life. Bellies that pack enough power to lift this landmass / from Richmond to Hayward / flip it over like a pancake / dump it into the Bay.

And if I know one thing / on this scared and terrible earth / it is this. Your bellies / have one more life to birth. Your own.

If I trust one thing / on this scared and / merciful earth, it is this. All love begins / with a voice. I have learned / to love. Because to write anything, first I / have to see it. In its wholeness, / without resistance. In its detail, / without judgment. And I am looking at you now, as you look at yourselves: well enough, deep enough, true enough, hard enough / to write yourself, well, and deep and true / into the lovely / of the lovely, / to love yourselves, well, deep, true, hard / to be the wellness / deepening / from hardness / that will rock the world.

Once upon a time, there was a voice. She wore her bulky white t-shirts / to hide / the rolls of her stretchmarked belly. She twisted her hair constantly, to quiet her / fingers craving for just one / cigarette. She loved her dogs / and pepperoni pizza. And rap dancing / and ocean spray in her / face, and rosemary-scented shower gel, / but most of all she loved the taste / of sobriety in her mouth. She stood outside / a bathroom door, calling / for her mother, / poking her fear through the keyhole / with a fingerprint bitten raw, her other / hand over her ear / to shut out a scream / she could not name.

You say: Do you hear me? Does anybody hear me?

I am listening to you now. The place where you catch your breath as you read / catch it in your chest as if CPS / were coming to take it away. I am listening to your hearts break / over and over on the page / listening to you re-make / your lives / from shattered glass. Listening to the music / that still chucksles in your hips / that has never quenched. Listening to your hunger / that hurt / at the junction of 27th and San Pablo / for lives that rise to meet / your largeness.

And if I believe one thing / on this scared and silent earth / it is the fire / in your breasts just wanting / for a touch. If I believe one thing / on this scared and singing earth / it is the bounties of your hands, / paper stained, exhaustedin, hands that help / babies and strollers / and cribs and bottle-feedings and 16 / months more and your back hurts and / the boy with now and what I meant. / Hands that reach again and again for one / word and lay it down / on the page / reach / for a second / word, and say / it beside the first, bill sometimes / like a benediction / the third is given to you, and you write – the dangerous sacred / replaceable / truth of your hearts.

Once upon a time, there was a voice. Her eyes were radiant with hope and / glowing with intelligence, her body was a living / question mark. She breathed in the world / around her, turned it over in her brain. asked: Why? And for whose benefit? Who makes money from this? And how do I / fit into this / shirt-so-wacked-it-in’t- / even-funny picture? She loved blues. / and drums. And every question her daughter / asked, and soft cotton on her skin, but / most of all she loved / the muscles of her mind. She had strong feet / that had to / carry / when the hearts began. She shook / her boots up and down / the corridors of / Project Pride, relearning / what her mother / felt like, re-defining / what a mother feels like, re-interpreting / what it is to be mothered. Her stomach / was bound and soft with a contentment that / she knew. Intimately. She named it / recovery.

You say: Do you feel me? Can you begin to feel – what I must live?

I’m feeling you now. The stab in your knees at the top of the staircase, / the rise of hairs on your arms / in exact configuration / of your baby’s body. The / canyon in your pelvis / when you open / your notebook, step to the stage / and begin. I’m feeling the burning in your tongue, the chill in your toes, each / you choose, and choose, and choose / again, to live from joy, not fear / I’m feeling the sadness in your spine for all / the lost years, the warrior cry in your chest / never again! The hum in your very / cells of coming home. To yourself.

And if I know one thing, on this luminous, / earth, this earth / so far-think beautiful. You / are the soil beneath the asphalt, rich / dark loam / where all life rises. You are the / largeness you seek.

And if I have one prayer on this / naked turning earth, it is this. That you meet yourselves / in the mirror. Name yourself / whole, body. Name yourselves pure. Name yourselves true and terrified, blessed / and bloomed, torn and knitted, shuffled / and sanctified. That you rise into your / voices, voices that have waited for you, / like your children, like your hearts, voices / that have always known, voices / that have never doubted / you would / return for them.

FOR THE WOMEN OF PROJECT PRIDE