The Contexts of our Organizing

Joanna Kerr: Good morning, buenos dias, bonjour… how are you feeling? How many of you did not get enough sleep last night, raise your hand? How many of you had a really good time dancing last night? How many of you are looking forward to these two days of this incredible forum? How many of you are a little bit grumpy this morning? I see a couple of hands… right here, next to me! It is my privilege to be moderating this morning’s session. This morning we are going to be examining the context of our organizing and going deep into the strategies that we are using in the power of our movements. But, before we go into the session, I just want to acknowledge the incredible work that the AWD team is doing. I think we should give a round of applause. In particular I want to give thanks to Lydia Alipaz, who is the executive director of AWD, who could not be here with us because she is recovering from a very difficult illness.

My name is Joanna Kerr and many of you will know that I was the former executive director of AWD, and I also missed the last forum because of a tragedy in my family. Some people say this is the curse of AWD, but if anything I think this is actually a demonstration of how strong this organization is, and why we need to build organizations that can last well beyond any individual. Yesterday, in one of the sessions, we heard about how we can never see ourselves as indispensable. So just a reminder to us all that this work carries on: that is the power of our movement.

Today, we are going to share the stories, strategies and analysis of these six incredible women who are sitting around me at this table. Let me share with you who these amazing women are, who are truly at the front lines of organizing for women’s rights, for human rights, for sexual and reproductive rights, for economic justice, for treatment access, and for the rights of people living with HIV and AIDS. I will start with Meena Seshu, who is from India, who is working with sex workers. We will hear about her amazing work in a few minutes. [Next is] Natasha Premo, who is a researcher and an activist with the Association for Progressive Communications, who lives in Johannesburg. She’s also on the board of AWD and on the frontlines of the struggle for communication rights. Before I get to the woman sitting on my left, there’s a woman who should have been here today. Her name is Sussan Tahnasebi, from Iran. The Iranian government has not allowed her to travel for two years. Right before this conference, at the end of October, her passport was confiscated again. She has been interrogated twice and she is under particular threat. She was on many conference calls in preparation for her participation in the forum, and it is our great loss that she is not here with us. This is the reality of our particular struggle. But I want you to know that there is something that you can do for Sussan. Look outside this place at the end of this [plenary] that you can sign, to put pressure on the government to release Sussan and her travel documents, so that she has the freedom to organize and to travel.

But look who stood in for her! We have here with us Dr. Shirin Ebadi, who is a judge [and] a human rights lawyer. In 2003, she won the Nobel Peace Prize for her incredible work with children and, of course for [her work on] women’s rights.

To my right is Wanda Nowicka, from Poland. Wanda has been working for two decades on health, women’s rights, sexual rights and reproductive rights in a very complex region. She works in Poland with the Polish Federation for Women and Family Planning, but she is also the co-founder of the ASTRAA network that is working on reproductive and sexual rights across the region. This is a woman who is also a fantastic dancer, among many of her other talents.

To her right is Martha Tholanah, who comes to us from Zimbabwe. Martha is an incredible HIV and AIDS activist. She is a leader of a positive women’s network, organizing women across Zimbabwe, but also across the region. She’s a member of the International Coalition of Women living with HIV and AIDS. She was just in Mexico, invited by the International AIDS Conference to represent women living with HIV and AIDS. And she is also an active member of the JASS movement building work in Southern Africa.

And last but not least is Nani Zulimarni from Indonesia, who is a co-director of JASS Southeast Asia. Nani is [also] the founder of PEKKA, which works with women’s groups in Indonesia on economic empowerment [for] widows and [other] female-headed households.

So, the first purpose of this session is to really get at what is the context of our organizing. The second purpose of this session is [to reflect on the question], why movements at all? What is it about the power of movements that is actually transforming the lives of women and men on the ground? What is it in particular about our strategies that are so powerful, so difficult to implement? What is it that we can see here, collectively, that we can take back to our communities?

I’m going to start with Shirin. Shirin, what is going on right now in Iran? What is the political context right now in Iran? Why is Sussan not with us? What is it that is different revolutionary guards arrived and made her get off the plane. She has not been allowed to go overseas to date. I ask you to support not only Sussan but also all the women who have been oppressed by the government. It is very important to know that whenever they arrest a woman, the movement won’t stop but will continue stronger than before. When a woman goes to prison there are 10 more active women who join the movement. This is a fact that amazes the government.

Joanna Kerr: It’s true – it’s the feminist backlash to repression. What you’re saying is that the more women that got arrested, the more women that mobilize. It’s our own backlash to repression. I’m going to turn to Meena. Meena, what is going on in India, around the world, in terms of the lives of sex workers? What is the context in which sex workers are trying to demand their rights that is so particularly challenging at this moment?

Meena Seshu: I think the sex workers’ rights movement is, unfortunately, fighting many [other] movements that are currently trying to repress their rights [because] their rights are not the right rights, for example. Many movements now believe that sex workers – their visibility, their voice, their arguments – are problematic because they are talking about the right to sex work. [Most generally agree that sex workers] should get citizenship, ration cards, health service, education services – these are not so much contested areas, although we do have the abolitionists wanting to ban sex work totally, which is a different space altogether. But within the rights movement and various other movements,
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Meena Seshu: This is when you come to talk about the state. As soon as the HIV/AIDS virus hit us, states moved in very fast, saying that people in multiple-sex partnerships should be targeted. With sex workers, the targeting was that they were vectors in [the spread of] HIV. Because [the state] believed that [sex workers] were vectors of the spread of HIV, they wanted them to curb it. We therefore have these polarized discussions within rights movements, which is unfortunate.

Joanna Kerr: What about the HIV and AIDS industry? How are sex workers being identified, being attacked, being named, being symbolized?

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Joanna Kerr: Yes, they have had a very strong impact on our region. You should understand that in our region, the US used to be ... like Eden (laughs). People were looking at the US – and at Bush and at Eden – [as a model] to follow, a model of progress. The Bush administration introducing conservative policies was for them an additional argument [for their own conservative policies]. This is not what we had under Communism. We had legal abortion under Communism – which [for them] was not a sign of progress. The sign of progress, for them, was [the conservative policies] the Bush administration was introducing.

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I have been a women’s rights activist for about 15 years. I came activism through an intellectual understanding of gender and power and through deep empathy for the numerous kinds of oppression that we as women experience. Perhaps because of the location and the make-up of participants, I found myself being moved, laughing more, listening more and viscerally feeling the power of movements. I really need to be held in this kind of space as I was beginning to feel burned out. I had forgotten that there were ways to work in social movements with all our hearts and souls and I was shown that, by example, from so many of the participants who came, raw, honest, vulnerable and seeking. I am changed.

Meena Seshu: It’s a global phenomenon. I’m talking about the state [promoting] condoms not so that sex workers can take care of themselves, which is what we would think, right? But rather to save the “bridge population” which is defined as the men who go to sex workers. This bridge population has to be taken care of – hold your breath – so that good women in their houses can be taken care of. We’re creating all these programs, trying to save men, I mean, that’s crazy – we don’t give a damn (pardon my language) about sex workers or [what happens to them]. They’re a virus, if they fall ill. There were no programs for [them].

The [labeling] of sex workers as one of the vectors of the spread of HIV [resulted in] a double stigma. You were in sex work, which is traditionally the most stigmatized work that you can do, and then you added on HIV to it. The discrimination is so strong now that we are seeing a situation where sex workers are saying, “no more.” The double whammy of HIV and sex work has actually given tremendous strength to the sex workers’ movements to fight back.

Joanna Kerr: You’ve talked about the role of the state, but you also talk about the ability to work outside of the power of the abolitionist movement. Can you speak to that a little bit more? Who are they? Who funds them?

Meena Seshu: Just to give you a little bit of a context, the abolitionist movement argues that [sex work] is sexual slavery. Because they believe sex work is sexual slavery, they have decided that the only (response) is to abolish it or to ban it. Unfortunately, with the Bush administration, the prostitution pledge institutionalized this understanding that trafficking and sex work were one and the same. A lot of money was put into the organizations that would work with the anti-prostitution pledge, which unfortunately turned out to be a lot of faith-based organizations, whose one strategy was to raid and “rescue” sex workers, using the most oppressive arm of the state – the police – to do that. Communities that had started gaining some strength in organizing themselves found themselves being raided and rescued after this prostitution pledge.

Joanna Kerr: I’m going to turn to Wanda now. You’re also seeing repressive forces – often the face of it is the Catholic Church. Can you tell us what is going on in Poland, and in the region, in terms of women’s reproductive and sexual rights?

Wanda Nowicka: Poland of the 21st century is experiencing a second wave of conservative and fundamentalist forces. The first wave happened in the beginning of the 90’s, paradoxically soon after Poland regained freedom and democracy. But this freedom and democracy did not apply to women, [especially not] to their reproductive rights. So, as a result of the Solidarity movement, which turned out to be very conservative on women’s rights, women in Poland lost abortion rights in 1993. In the 90’s we were struggling against this restrictive legislation. Now, in the 21st century, we’re experiencing another wave of conservatives. These kind of forces, as you might say, are primarily coming from the Roman Catholic Church – are pushing to restrict this restrictive legislation even further. For example, two years ago, we had an attempt to introduce into the law a provision of protection of life from the moment of conception. They failed, fortunately, but they failed very narrowly. Since then, we have been fighting, just after another. The situation is very difficult for Polish women. You can observe similar trends in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Joanna Kerr: Are you seeing a de-secularization of the state in the region? Is the state? Is it private actors? Who is really driving this agenda?

Wanda Nowicka: At ASTRA’s session, after this plenary, I am going to show a picture [of] the current polish president, Lech Kaczynski, kissing the hand of Pope Benedict XVI, which obviously shows the impact of the Vatican and the church on the Polish state. You cannot imagine [holding] any kind of gathering [in Poland] with a [Catholic] mass at the beginning. In principle, we are still a secular state, but in practice I would say that we are a religious state.

Joanna Kerr: Have the Bush administration’s foreign policies had any impact on your region?

Wanda Nowicka: Oh yes, they have had a very strong impact on our region. You should understand that in our region, the US used to be ... like Eden (laughs). People were looking at the US – and at Bush and at Eden – [as a model] to follow, a model of progress. The Bush administration introducing conservative policies was for them an additional argument [for their own conservative policies]. This is not what we had under Communism. We had legal abortion under Communism – which [for them] was not a sign of progress. The sign of progress, for them, was [the conservative policies] the Bush administration was introducing.

Joanna Kerr: What about the funding context in your region?

Wanda Nowicka: Hard issue. Funding is very scarce in the region. There are very few international foundations that would like to support us and I have decided that the only way to do it is to support local foundations, but even the European Union funding that was supposed to replace the foundation funding did not come. So we are really in some vacuum, as far as funding.

Joanna Kerr: We’re going to come back to this, Martha, some people in this room have come a very long way, from being so far out, so what are you saying? Is there a form of political repression, an extraordinarily difficult financial crisis. What is going on in Zimbabwe, right now?

Martha Tholakan: As you rightfully say, in Zimbabwe, things have become very difficult. It’s beyond proportions that we had ever believed could happen, just after another. The situation is very difficult for Polish women. You can observe similar trends in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

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people who are marginalized. Food is very hard to come by. Even if you have money in your pocket it’s very difficult to get food, but many people do not have the money.

Joanna Kerr: Power sharing was meant to come after these last elections and the struggle around the elections. Is power sharing happening? Is there political light at the end of the tunnel that you see, at this moment?

Martha Tholanah: In principle, on paper, power sharing was supposed to happen, but many of us, particularly in the positive women’s network, did not believe that it would work, because we’ve seen attempts at power sharing before where signatures have not been respected. Yesterday I just read that one of the parties had just withdrawn from the deal. So there is no more power sharing – [the party that withdrew] said they won’t participate in marginalizing people more. I’m not sure [if] this is going to cause more difficulties, but in a way, I’m not sure the power sharing was going to be of any benefit to the common people.

Joanna Kerr: So no one had hope anyway?

Martha Tholanah: No.

Joanna Kerr: What about hyperviolence? Explain what means to a woman in the rural area? You used to say now... it is a five million dollar note? Tell us what this actually means in terms of the economic crisis in Zimbabwe.

Martha Tholanah: When I left Zimbabwe on Tuesday, there was a one million dollar note and I’m not sure what’s there by now.

Joanna Kerr: What’s the conversion? How much is one million dollars in, say, Rand or US dollars?

Martha Tholanah: It’s very difficult [to say]. It changes sometimes three times a day. The week before last, I went onto the street, which is the only fair market where you will get value for your money. I changed $20 USD and I got almost $2,000,000 ZWD – and that was from someone who was on the lower side of the exchange. [Later], when I asked them to transfer money into my account, for 50 US dollars, I got three quadrillion 29 dollars. I am not sure how many zeros that is, but that is what was deposited into my account. But by now, I’m not sure if it of any value to buy even my basic commodities for a month.

Joanna Kerr: Under this political repression, we’ve heard some horrific stories of sexual violence against women. Tell us about some of this.

Martha Tholanah: Yes, we had elections on the 29th of March. After that there were anomalies in the counting, and the results took forever to come out. Then there was going to be a re-run on the 27th of June, so there was a [period of] little in terms of activities by organizations. People were being taken into camps. People were being attacked in their own homes. I think because [of] the way the SADC had prepared them...

Joanna Kerr: What is the SADC?

Martha Tholanah: The Southern African Development Community. It prepared the election process in terms of the freedom of association [and] in terms of coverage by the media. It was not really fair ... there was some coverage going against the opposition in the mainstream media, and that meant that people were open about who they were supporting. But that [openness translated into] repercussions after March 29th when it [became] obvious that the ruling party was losing. The funny thing was that as soon as the re-run was done, it didn’t take many hours to get the results. But women from the network of positive women were sending me text messages from all over Zimbabwe to say they’d been attacked, they’d been raped. Some had gone to the police station to report [the incidents].

Joanna Kerr: Why? Why were women being attacked?

Martha Tholanah: Because they had been accused of having voted for the wrong party. Some had their hands chopped off thanks to the party that was in power at the time. They painted their palm with blood as a symbol. They were told that what’s that a lesson so that they can’t use that hand again. [They were] sexually violated and homes were burnt...

Joanna Kerr: But why would they particularly target positive women or sex workers?

Martha Tholanah: I think they are the easier scapegoat. I think in any conflict situation, people will be targeted, but I think women suffered more. There were new infections. We had seen a decline in the prevalence rate announced last year, and then now with the impact of the violence that went on, obviously it’s going to mean more infections in an environment where resources are very limited in terms of actually responding to who are people who are already positive. We thought after the elections, things are going to be OK, but the elections have gone on and on, on forever. I have thought, I really think it’s a lesson to us to say that we need to be part of all the processes, to actually ensure that we protect the most marginalized people, the most vulnerable.

Joanna Kerr: I think that is a useful segue to just pause for this moment. We recognize that not very far away from here in the Democratic Republic of Congo, there is a humanitarian crisis. The sexual violence against women, the kinds of atrocities we are seeing, [have] some people talking about it in terms of the holocaust of the millennium. There are representatives here from the Congo who have put together a statement, and it behoves us to acknowledge their particular struggle and be in solidarity with these women by organizations. People were being taken into camps.

Joanna Kerr: What is the SADC? [Excerpt] As representatives of women’s organizations from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) gathered at the 11th International AWID forum, we denounce the support to CNDP (National Congress for People’s Defense) from external forces through neighboring countries, which signed peace agreements in the Great Lakes region. We denounce CNDP attacks targeting civilians who are not actively involved in war, particularly women and children. We also denounce human rights abuses perpetrated by all armed groups including the DRC army (FARDC), in violation of the Goma peace agreement signed in January 2008. We request a declaration of solidarity from the more than two thousand women meeting in this 11th AWID forum, in order to end the war in the DRC... We ask all nations across the globe to take note of the holocaust of the millennium, which is happening right now in the DRC, with total indifference and lack of concern from the international community. Six million deaths, two millions internally displaced, thousands of raped women and girls. We are calling upon the United Nations and African Union to immediately act to protect civilians, due to the DRC government’s limit to do so.

Joanna Kerr: Nani, I’m going to turn to you. For many of us, who work on economic rights, we completely bypass the idea of economic empowerment [and] economic rights. Yet right now, there is an international economic financial crisis. What do you think is the reason why so much of the women’s movement doesn’t deal with economic rights issues?

Nani Zulminar: I think first, it’s really the perception that women are not economic actors. That is what we say face. It is culturally socialized in our lives that we are not economic actors. In reality, most of the women, especially the poorest, they work, they earn, and they contribute to the household. What we have seen is that we have a withdrawal... I think that is the main reason why economic issues are marginalized in the women’s movement. In the past, it even seemed if you worked on economic [issues], that you were rejected on development issues, that you were a developmentalist. It was not strategy; it was practical.

Joanna Kerr: You work in Indonesia, the largest Muslim majority country in the world. You are working with women-headed households. What is it in particular about the way in which you are organizing women that you can actually get at some of these fundamental economic issues?

Nani Zulminar: I think for women-headed households, there are two main issues here in Indonesia at least and in some other parts of the world. The first is invisibility. In our contexts, if you don’t have a husband, you are just invisible. You have to [be] a daughter of somebody, sister of somebody or the wife of somebody. The second is the stigmatization of women without husbands, especially if you are divorced, for example. [A divorced woman] is a bad woman.

Joanna Kerr: Why is there a stigma there not to have a husband?

Nani Zulminar: It’s in the culture. It’s the [cultural] values that say good women must be married. It is [supposed to be] the goal of women to keep the man. [Even if there is] violence – we call it a bloody marriage – you have to stay [in the marriage]. That is the perception that has been built. Many women [have] internalized [this perception] very well. If you are not married, if you do not have a husband then you are [a bad woman].

Joanna Kerr: Have you seen a trend in the past 10 years in terms of the impact of globalization on women in Indonesia?

Nani Zulminar: Oh yes. It’s huge. When we started to organize women’s groups in the 1990s, there were 1.5 million women-headed households (the national statistic, although we do not believe it) was 13 percent. Now it is 17 percent. There is a trend now that men migrate to other countries or other areas for earning, and leave the women behind with the children [and] with poor resources. Because of the [current] economic crisis and global markets, women who were [previously] not affected directly by the free market, now they are affected. Resources are now very scarce, and prices are very much influenced by global systems and decision-making at the
global level. So, life is more difficult and more women become the heads of households. With very limited resources it’s a very difficult situation.

Joanna Kerr: We’ve been talking a little bit about the role of the state. We’ve been talking about the role of rises fundamentalisms. We’ve definitely been talking about the role of militarization. How is this playing out in Southeast Asia? How do they connect to each other?

Nani Zulminani: It’s very connected. They influence each other. 1997-98 was a very critical time for our region. The economic crisis led to political turbulence and political turmoil [and] that happened. Many parts of Indonesia wanted self-determination. Conflict happened at different levels – horizontal (where people used different kinds of issues like religion, ethnicity) and then also vertical (between people and the government, where the government had to force the military to really control the situation). [All of this] really impacted women directly. [There was a] huge amount of violence not only domestically, but also state violence, which really traumatized women.

Joanna Kerr: Ok we’re going to come back to that. I now want to move over to Natasha, who’s working on communication rights. How do you see the media and the role of the internet? What is being challenged at this particular moment in terms of our access to voice and our control of voice?

Natasha Primo: OK. I have to state first what the intent was around setting up the internet, and what the builders of the internet had in mind.

Joanna Kerr: Wasn’t it the U.S. Military who started it?

Natasha Primo: Well it was some of that. But the researchers who were behind the development of the technology, what they had in mind was that it would be used for the free flow of information. That it would be used to connect people. [But] what we’ve seen in the last 10-15 years is the ascendance of corporate interests and national security interests in a way that the internet is governed. That has profound implications for voice, for control over information about ourselves, for control over the way that we represent ourselves, and [control over] the way that we can use the internet to express ourselves. To me this is very important and I like it.

Joanna Kerr: We have been talking quite heavily about extraordinarily difficult contexts in which we are working. We’ve only named just a few. But this conference, the Power of Movements, is about to confront, how to resist, how to be the backlash. In fact, Shrin, communication has been a critical ingredient to the Million Signatures Campaign. Tell us a little bit about how women in Iran are using communication in very innovative ways, to push for their equality agenda.

Shrin Ebadi: Unfortunately, the use of technology in women’s rights is not very high because of interference. You will be interested to know that all websites related to women’s rights are filtered in Iran – and even more interesting to know that the government has made a directive that says no movie can be produced, no theater can be played, and no books can be written to promote feminism. This is the government’s attitude toward women’s rights. About the One Million Signatures campaign: we created a website, in addition to the door-to-door strategy, to collect the signatures. Yes, we had a website! But they filtered it. It was not accessible in Iran. So we constructed a new one. They filtered it again, and again and again. It happened eight times. We will make a new website, but it will take a long time after constructing a new website to inform our audiences.

Actually, we do have technology and lots of computers in Iran. Computer literacy is very high in Iran. But the government filters websites and doesn’t let people have easy access to them. The government also doesn’t provide high-speed internet services for everybody. The internet speed in Iran is so slow that most of the time you get bored and regret using it. The problems in using technology in Iran are related to government.

Joanna Kerr: Of course, but women in Iran have stayed one step ahead every single time, in terms of changing the website, new URLs. You know, this is a real model in terms of [how to organize] in one of the most repressive environments in which to organize. But I look at Meena… I had the privilege of seeing her and her website. Meena first of all, I thought Meena was a sex worker when I first met her, and then I found out that in fact Meena is a married woman, that she’s married to a man. We shouldn’t make any assumptions here! I walked with her through the alleys where the brothels as women poured out of the brothels to hug

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AWID interviews forum participant Ekaete Umoh from the Family-Centered Initiative for Challenged Persons, Nigeria.

AWID: What is your name?

EU: My name is Ekaete Umoh.

AWID: Which region are you located in?

EU: I’m in Africa. I come from Nigeria.

AWID: Can you tell us a little bit about the work of your organization?

EU: My organization Family-Centered Initiative for Challenged Persons is an NGO that works to promote the issues of women with disabilities. Our focus is to mainstream the issues of women with disabilities in gender and development programmes. We do research, raising awareness of the barriers that women with disabilities face in their daily lives and how women’s movements or organizations can incorporate this into their work.

We believe in integration. We don’t believe that we should be separated as women with disabilities. Within the work you’re doing you should be able to create space for women with disabilities.

AWID: Which movement or movements do you or does your organization consider itself to be part of and why?

EU: Let me start by saying that AWID has really opened up a space for us to identify the movements. Sometimes, 2006, I was in Mexico for the young feminist training program held by AWID. That also created the awareness for us and how we can take the space, so we were able to see various women’s movements and have been collaborating with them. Also, recently AWID has sponsored us to go to the Feminist Tech Exchange. That was very interesting. The training track I participated in was digital story-telling. I’m going to go back home to use the skills I learned.

We identify with cross-cutting issues, not just thematic issues. So we identify with every movement that has an up space as much as possible so that women with disabilities can benefit from it.

AWID: Why does movement building matter?

EU: This is interesting because I think collectively we have power in this space. What one single NGO network cannot do, movement building will achieve because it’s global, it has more power and collectively we’ll be able to achieve much more. It’s very important because it’s going to achieve what one single NGO would never ever achieve alone.

AWID: What does solidarity from and within women’s rights movements look like?

EU: [Laughs] That is self-explanatory. Alliances, if formed within women’s movements, means coming together with ideas, with a collective interest, with the space to actually advocate on our issues. You’re identifying with the struggles, with successes, with the passion of your sisters. We identify with social issues and we go ahead to face whatever challenges or obstacles or celebrations we have. That’s solidarity. Within women’s feminist movements we have a collective agenda (although our issues may be different and diverse). But the diversity is what is helping us to collectively achieve success.

AWID: What have been some of the organizational experiences with other social movements your organization has had about your challenges and achievements and what did you learn from this experience about how you build stronger movements?

EU: Honestly, it is very challenging with other women’s movements. That was the last one to fall [to AWID]. We’ve belonged to several other movements and the issue is that they never got to understand why disability issues should be reflected in the agenda. We’ve been to women’s meetings and there we were talking about women issues. I got up to say, “Excuse me where is the space for women with disabilities in this discourse?” And somebody bluntly told me, “We’re talking about women, not disability.”

Honestly, I was highly embarrassed. I will never forget that. But because I believed in what I was doing, I kept on speaking up. But I believe if we don’t denigrate discrimination but this is discrimination within discrimination! I’m a woman before a woman with a disability.”
and squeeze and laugh with Meena. In fact, communication has been a very central factor in terms of the movement for sex workers – cell phones as well. Tell us about some of this.

Meena Seshu: The first part, of course, is that sex workers use cell phones to contact their clients. Sex workers who do not know how to read and write, using the cell phone to get better clients – I think it’s super. The other part of it, of course, are those [in the cell phone] has been very helpful in telling people when there’s a raid. There’s a raid and everybody’s cell phone is ringing. You can get immediate communication. So cell phones have been very good because women who do not know how to read and write cannot use the internet. They don’t know how to deal with email, so the internet is closed to them. But cell phones have been critical.

What has also happened is that the internet services have really helped. Sangli, as you know, is pretty remote. But every time we have a raid, the next morning we are able to tell the world what the raid was about. We can also get signature campaigns out. In fact, we were part of the first e-mail campaign in India, when one of our workers [was] being attacked by right-wing political parties. The good thing about [that campaign] was that it was the first time that the women’s movement actually brought into the sex workers movement. It was because we could actually reach out and tell them what happened – and they could understand the seriousness, wherein a sex worker, a woman, was being attacked.

Joanna Kerr: Wanda, you have been implementing some pretty innovative strategies. Maybe you could share, first of all, one of some that you might know about, the Women on Waves. What you are doing now in terms of pushing back and making as you possibly can against the attack on women’s sexual and reproductive rights?

Let me challenge you. You’ve got all these documents, policy advocacy. You have a wonderful new documentary. Do you really think this is going to make a difference?

Joanna Kerr: Let me challenge you. You’ve got all these documents, policy advocacy. You have a wonderful new documentary. Do you really think this is going to make a difference?

Wanda Nowicka: First of all, what is important, imagine that we don’t exist.

Joanna Kerr: Who is we?

Wanda Nowicka: We – women’s groups that are trying to push for better rights for women. So if we don’t exist … I can’t imagine where we would be at this point if we weren’t pushing, that’s one thing. But on the other hand, I also see some changes in society. For example, what we observe in our society is that feminism is becoming trendy among young generations, in the university. One of the slogans that is being used by students, in the demonstrations is, “Feminism – I deserve it.” So, you know, society is changing. Society is not the politicians (fortunately), so there are some hopes that we are moving in the right direction.

Joanna Kerr: Great, thank you. So Martha. Feminism. Do you deserve it in Zimbabwe? How is the positive women’s network and positive women taking feminism on?

Martha Tholanah: We desire it, as positive women. The way we’ve been taking it is actually making a difference wherever positive women live.

Joanna Kerr: How do you organize in your context?

Martha Tholanah: We use activities that are happening with other organizations, other activities – that’s where we connect. [Or] we may have one-to-one or small groups at the clinics or at the hospitals. It is very difficult to organize due to restrictions from the government. Freedom of association is actually reversed now. [There are also] issues of the monetary policy, which makes it difficult to actually get people together. If you are traveling for other things, you may get hired as a [person] who will be to such a place in that area. That’s how our communication moves. Also, the use of SMS text messages is difficult because many women have to borrow cell phones. There are also issues of electricity outages. Sometimes someone may go for a week with their phone battery flat, but we [also] get messages around by word of mouth.

Joanna Kerr: Feminists could have gone on trial, as we heard about in the African Feminist Forum. Feminists could have gone on trial over the past decade for not taking on HIV/AIDS in the way that we should have. Do you see a shift in terms of women’s movements, feminist movements, engaging with positive women and HIV and AIDS activists?

Martha Tholanah: I think the shift is very obvious now. There [used to be a] stigma [in] the first messages that came out about the transmission of HIV. Women who were found to be or who declared that they were HIV positive were thought to be loose women. Sometimes they would have been widowed – and people would have been worried that they would cause their husbands or infect their husbands, really. But now people say that anyone can actually get an HIV infection. This is where we see the shift coming. Also, the feminist movement is actually taking up issues of HIV and the HIV movement. It is obvious now that feminism should be a part of the way we do our work, the way we live.

Joanna Kerr: I was hearing at this conference that it’s taken a long time for people to make the link between HIV/AIDS and poverty. I find that incredibly odd that people haven’t been making that link. I mean, it is pretty obvious. Why do you think it’s taken so long for there to be a much stronger analysis and strategy around connecting HIV and poverty? What was going on there?

Martha Tholanah: I think the first messages were that HIV was a disease that gay men got. It was only white people from whom who had HIV. If you got it, you’d sleep with a white man. So it wasn’t really linked with poverty because in our region, being white was not associated with poverty. In that way, there were a lot of misconceptions. By the
for me as well. And it’s everywhere, so if you try to live [to] your full potential, you will have to confront patriarchal power, and you will have to be a feminist.

We have the right to make mistakes! The important issue is to realize when we have made mistakes, and be brave enough to admit it, and not redo them

Meena Seshu: Many mistakes, so many that I cannot count them. But many of these mistakes were [mitigated] by the fact that I was working in a collective. When you’re in a collective, [and] you make mistakes, somebody pulls you up. So that has been a good experience. But at a personal level, as an activist, I got so enamoured and glamour about being an activist, I forgot to be an ordinary woman ...

Joanna Kerr: What does that mean?

Meena Seshu: Well, I forgot I had a sexual life. You know the computer is so much sexier … it’s not funny! We have a problem, I totally agreed! The excitement of what is happening in the world out there, especially when you’re sitting in a rural setting like Sangi, can be very very attractive. The other thing is, I was thinking of my friends, my close associates, and they’re all people from the movement. We meet, we talk politics, all the time. There doesn’t seem to be [room for] a normal life. I think that’s what we miss as activists. We tend to stick to comfortable spaces, and we don’t make friends with the outside world – and we need to do that. If we want to change the outside world, we need to do that.

Joanna Kerr: It’s funny none of you have talked about the role of conflict in your organizing. But we all recognize that from conflict, from crisis, many opportunities emerge. Perhaps the meta-analysis is that because we are working in a world that is defined by conflict – of all forms of ideologies, of all forms of economic structures – that in fact from this, we are giving birth to a new commitment to feminism. A new commitment to a feminist analysis that breaks down class and race and sexual orientation and brings in women with disabilities. I really think there is a feminist backlash to what is happening around us. We haven’t got to talk about Obama yet … I did think that perhaps our strategies might change going forward, in terms of the role of the United States government in terms of our organizing going forward. Wanda, do you want to say something very quickly?

Wanda Nowicka: Yes, quickly. All politicians of the right wing in Poland went to the US to follow Obama’s campaign. Everybody is going to use Obama’s campaigns nowadays, so we have to be aware of that. Everybody’s learning.

Joanna Kerr: And Obama’s campaigning, as we all know, was a vindication of movement building and the power of movement building (applause). But what you’re saying is, be careful. Our opposition has learned just as much about the power of movement building, in terms of how they’re going to address our particular feminist backlash. We are out of time, but nobody can go because there is a very big surprise for the end of this plenary. I just want you to give a huge round of applause to these incredible activists, who are also involved in many workshops so you can really engage with them one on one.

The plenary ended with an impromptu tribute to iconic South African singer and anti-apartheid activist, Miriam Makeba, led by up-and-coming singer and activist Khethi, singing Makeba’s “Pata Pata” and accompanied by jazz instrumentalist Edwina Thorne.

SCREAMING
Poem by Shailja Patel, Kenya/USA. Performed at the forum by Shailja Patel. Reprinted with permission.

I.
there are too many battles and too many wounds and I I can’t take it I don’t want to know that Inez Garcia was sentenced to life imprisonment for killing the man who held her down while two other men raped her. I want to cover my ears and scream to block out the voices that chant that Pili Bjork had her eyes gouged out by her husband and because she did not bear him a son.

I want to be free of the murder that pounds in my brain because six hundred women a year in Delhi alone are dosed in paraffin and burned burned to death for the crime of too small a dowry I want to pretend it won’t happen to me did you know that a student at Sussex university was raped in her first night in residence by a man who just walked just walked into her room I am not a part of this bleeding this scream I don’t want to challenge argue fight construct conflict negotiate beg for change do you hear me

I want to retreat to a room filled with humans shut out the night the fear and pain bear myself stop screaming inside unravel my breathing ask in a very low voice dare I claim the right to a voice that does not scream?

II.
so it wasn’t until I learned to fight I could be sexy the swing of my hip developed in pace with my claw strike I grew out my hair as my flesh grew harder began to wear lipstick bare my shoulders as I learned to judge how fast to strike and where groin eyes nipples

It wasn’t until I could walk down a street knowing I could turn rage into action that I could straight down the same street say with my stride yes I think I look good too yes I revel in my body yes I love the sun on my skin

this body is mine the better I learn to defend it the better I flaunt it from sheer joy

III.
for the truth of experience Is in the body when I am a fighter my body is weapon when I am a lover my body is food now my body is paintbrush story truth illusion sing through my lungs like the shock of cold water breathe me clear breathe me free breathe me home