PLENARY 4
The Future of Movements

“Where do we go from here?”
Introduction by Brigid Inder, The Netherlands

My name is Brigid Inder. I am on the board of AWID, and I’m also the executive director for the Women’s Initiatives for Gender Justice. In the last four days of this forum, there have been more than 160 panels, plenaries, and workshops. Eight hundred women marched through the streets in solidarity with South African feminists demanding an end to violence against women. There have been caucuses, there was a Young Feminist Activism Committee day, there have been performances, plays, poetry... a few women have met every single morning to run or walk together. There has been music, parties, dancing, tears and humour. If this isn’t the way to build a global women’s movement, I don’t know what is.

But after all of this, where do we go from here? What are the possible futures our movements require? We know our size and our strengths, but where is our impact? What do we dare to envision, and how do we get there? This panel will reflect on some of the new ideas, some of the insights, lessons, gaps, silences, and key themes that have emerged during the forum. It will also identify ways in which our collective power can be harnessed and magnified.

“We need an alternative way of organizing ourselves”
Presentation by Sindi Blose, South Africa

In the midst of all the pain, in the midst of all the violations of our rights, I still feel great. Don’t you feel good about yourselves? That’s how I feel about myself.

What I’m taking from this forum is a place from within myself, and a place from within ourselves, to organize ourselves better, to intensify the power of our numbers, to see the change that we want to see. The other thing that I’m taking away from the conference is that we’ve been organizing ourselves, and we’ve been fighting for space in the current existing structures. Our efforts have had some benefits, but we have compromised a lot of our rights in the process. I’m talking about the organizations that we belong to, the political organizations and some of the NGOs that we belong to that are mixed groups, where we’ve had to fight for space to have our voices heard.

I believe that we need an alternative way of organizing ourselves. We need to create a space that is initiated by us, on our terms. Giving an example in the South Africa context: I believe yesterday was a historical day, when a group of women from South Africa came together at the forum, and we said, “We are tired of what is going on in our country. We cannot take the attacks on our rights any more. We are organizing at a grassroots level as women’s movements, but we are fragmented. We need to consolidate our movement and [our] power at a national level.”

We decided that [none of] the political parties in this country, [as we move] towards the elections of 2009, represent our voice. We [therefore] cannot vote, because if we vote, we are giving our votes to somebody who will not represent [us] when they get into power. But if we sit at home and [don’t] vote, then we are silent, and we cannot afford to be silent. So we decided that we are going to look into options of opening a女人’s party, and running for office. As of today, and the many days that will follow, we will be convening as women in South Africa, to plan ahead.

I said that I would speak for five minutes and demonstrate for another five. How many people know the following song (songs)? I want [to know] by a show of hands. How many people know that song? How do you feel about the song? I hate that song too! But [in] the movement we are building, we need to demonstrate the change that we want to see. And right now I want to demonstrate the change I want to see using this very song. There was something I learned back in 2004 at the Gender and AIDS forum back in Durban. They said, you must take your devil, turn him upside down, and put him on his head. That is what I want to do with the song, and I want us to do it together.

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When Zuma was accused during the rape trial, one of the defenses he used when he was questioned was that she was wearing a kanga. A kanga is a wrap-around, and the fact that she was only wearing a wrap-around indicated that she wanted to have sex. Now that is unacceptable. But there are a lot of men who think like that, that if you wear a miniskirt then you are asking for sex, however and whenever he wants. So I want us to change that song ... a kanga is a wrap-around ... it goes like this (sings).

So here I demonstrate the change I want to see with the song, because [Zuma] has made the song famous, but he hasn’t realized that he made it famous for us. Because we are going to take the song, and we are going to use it. But we are going to change the message. So for all the women who know the song, I would like them to follow and echo (session ends with singing).
I heard a sister from Ecuador say that power isn’t in one place, that it isn’t static. Like this idea, the idea that power can change from hand to hand, that it can come from the north towards the south, and from the centre to the margins.

It seems to me that in order to talk about the power of feminist movements, we also need to talk about the political choices that we make in order to construct the movement. I think what inspired me a lot at this forum was the question of power. Many discussions that occurred in this forum pointed to the need to deepen our analysis regarding the question of power, and what kind of power we are talking about from within the feminist movement, from the centre of the movement to the margins.

I heard a sister from Ecuador say that power isn’t in one place, that it isn’t static. Like this idea, the idea that power can change from hand to hand, that it can come from the north towards the south, and from the centre to the margins. That it can change from being in the hands of an older generation of women, and then transfer to the younger generation. I think that we need to create a dance that will allow us to dance with this power. I dance with power for a while, and then pass it to another, and another, and another. And like this, we are continuing to share it. But what power are we talking about? What power are we creating? What power will empower us? From what position are we living power?

I don’t think that we need to construct a linear definition of power. Perhaps we are talking about many powers, of many ways to generate and create power. I have a question that still remains to be answered. I would like to ask it again: for what reason do we want power? To change the world, yes? To end all forms of oppressions, to end social injustices, and to create another world for women and for humanity. I am talking a lot about power that for right now, seems to be in my hands. Still my hands continue sweating a lot. You can see them, no?

Yesterday something interesting happened to me. I was talking with a woman about a project we are doing in our youth network about [the] generational gap. We were discussing that we only realize that we have power when someone [else] reminds us of it. It might be something simple, and perhaps this is something that many of you have already realized. But for me, it was incredible to perceive that relationship. Ultimately, we are dependent on each other. If I have power, someone [else] doesn’t have it, and I need to recognize this.

Another point that surfaced when we talked about power is the idea that in order to talk about our desire to create power, we also need to talk about privileges and lack of privileges. We need to confront that we are not all in the same position. We also like to share different things.

In Brazil, my Afro-Brazilian sisters always question me as to whether I, as a white woman who wants to change the world, am willing to give up my privileges in order to bring about a feminist revolution. What about for all of you? The feminist movement was always a social movement that questioned the relations of power, and it always generated passionate discussions about the topics at hand. I believe that now, in this forum, we have generated many passionate ideas about power both from the outside and from within. I think that it is a challenge to all of us – all generations, ethnicities, sexual orientations … all us who form the feminist movement and have the desire to change the world.

It’s amazing to look at all the pink scarves. I don’t have mine on because I just love to show ancestresses. If we young women are here today, it’s because many things are working within the feminist movement. If we are here today questioning the relations of power from within the feminist movement, it’s because you have inspired us to think about the invisibility of youth, it is certain that we are talking about relations of power. We are questioning what kind of power we are generating as feminists from different generations. We are part of the same movement, and we have to continue struggling. We are here to make poetry within the feminist movement. To redefine our struggle, every day and every second, is the future still not given; it is not predetermined. And like this, we struggle.

I bring with me from this forum the possibility to create safe spaces to talk about power from within the feminist movement. I leave here with a stronger desire to work with feminists from other generations. I also bring a plural feminism – feminisms – with many colours, many songs, faces, experiences and knowledge. I bring the feeling of many women marching together, where borders do not matter. We are all united to change the world.

I also bring the concretization of a dream of many young feminists that was realized at this forum: the creation of a fund for young feminists. I re-affirm the commitment that all of us, young or not young, will contribute to the fund. And finally, I will bring to my country the resistance of the African women, with all of their songs and strength. For although we might not have the same language, I have the impression that we can share many things, with a smile or a just a look.

Finally, to finish, I hope that we can all continue fighting. Go forward sisters! We give significance to the time, and we cannot wait for things to happen on their own.
We were surr... and I think really affirmed, by the way several people claimed the f-word (feminism), who were uncomfortable with that label even coming to this forum.

I have tried to organize the different forms of feedback that have come in the categories of Currents, Undercurrents, Seen and Heard, Absences and Silences, and the Big Leaps Forward. So let me begin with Currents. I think these are the waves that have washed over and drenched all of us over the past four days. I think we have really begun to embrace the importance of an intergenerational way of working. That is here to stay. The young women are not going away, and neither are the old. So we really have begun to grapple with ways of constructing our organizations, our movements, and our work in ways that harness the power and resources of all feminists, regardless of age.

I think my sister has already talked about how pervasive power and the analysis of power has been throughout our discussions. I would only add that I felt that there was almost a celebratory embracing of our own power, like it was a lover. This could be linked to, I think, a resurgence of feminism as an ideology that truly informs our organizing. We were surprised, and I think really affirmed, by the way several people claimed the f-word (feminism), who were uncomfortable with that label even coming to this forum.

There has been, I think, a strong sense of the need to look inside our own use and abuse of power, and to find new ways of relating to it. [We came to] a recognition of the deep structures of power within our own domain, and the need to bring them to the surface, and create workable tools to transform our own use of power with each other. We have recognized therefore, I think, the need for ground rules – new rules of engagement – and the need to make these explicit and hold each other to account for them.

There has been a pervasive celebration, as my sisters have also pointed out, of the diversity of our movements, and hopefully a leaving behind of the politics of inclusion and exclusion that caused much pain and isolation in the past. It has been refreshing not to hear even once at this forum the question, “but who are the real feminists?”

Our sister said in the opening plenary that there cannot exist a feminist movement without lesbians, trans people and so forth. I’m sure she would have added to the list grassroots women, global women, and all of us able and differently abled. We have sensed the joy of many sisters who felt their voices and issues were once on the margins, struggling for legitimacy, whose sessions were now packed to bursting. There has been an almost unanimous feeling that this has been a very inclusive space, bringing a wider diversity of movements and feminist actors to the table.

There has been a strong feeling especially among younger feminist activists that not only were they here in numbers, and everywhere, but that they were engaged with a process of real learning and respect and listening across the generations. We have seen a strong attempt to tackle the politics of funding and donor-grantee relationships, and how these could be transformed. Related to this there has been a grappling, in many contexts and many sessions, with NGOization as a challenge that confronts our movement building, but also as a possibility and as a handicap. We have seen a strong tendency to ask that you, to have the right of association, has been withdrawn or denied, and of locations where NGOs have become a substitute for movements, have depoliticized our movements, or have claimed for themselves the title of movement that is not deserved. We have also seen them as spaces from which movements have survived. So the challenge is to redefine ourselves and our movements.

Undercurrents: some good, some not so good. The safety of our space, I think, has been somewhat derailed at times by those who, in the light of the other’s on our own, have come not necessarily to listen and understand, but perhaps to wonder and judge other ways of being, and other ways of expressing our infinite capacity to love and be loved. Some have come here with an evangelical spirit, to save the souls of sisters they believe are going straight to hell, or threatening their faith. This is where the rules of engagement become critical. We would remind all of us that we have worked very hard to open this space, and to make it safe for all, that means – what safety means – as we struggle to open and expand the space to as many as possible.

How do we protect its safety? We have to recall that at one time even a person like me would not have been on this plenary. That many were excluded because they were Southern, because they were activists. We remind those of you who have struggled with this space and the discourse that it permits to occur that some of us cannot talk about our issues safely anywhere else. We cannot allow those voices to be silenced or condemned here. We are not asking that you all agree. We don’t even expect you to accept or understand. But we do demand that you listen and respect.

Attention: We have all embraced the importance of intergenerationality and intergenerationality, and congratulated ourselves on how wonderful we have become at this, at the huge mass of young women at this meeting. I’m told that 700 pink scarves, and I think really affirmed, it. Most of us have been wearing them very proudly through the four days. But only seven women over the age of 35 stood up for the multigenerational dialogue today.

There has been a tension between donors and grantees. Even amidst the constructive dialogue, there’s a hunger for resources. There is pressure from back home that if you have been privileged enough to come to this space, you better bring back some money. Donors have felt beseeched. But also there are the deeper and really serious dilemmas of competing for resources, and the pervasive fear that we don’t even know how this financial crisis is going to affect our already limited resource base.

We’re all still caught to some extent in binary thinking: good and bad, good and evil, sin and not sin ... also grassroots or global, younger or older, sexuality or poverty. We must still push ourselves to transcend these binaries, and build more embracing frameworks that will not be about either or about.

There has been a subtle shifting of many paradigms – breaking the body/mind binary, speaking about the best thing about being disabled ... one could not imagine a conversation like this 10 years ago. [We have seen the] creation of new knowledge and ideas in other than the dominant world language, and the final breaking of through of the glass ceiling [in terms] of where the best, the most powerful new concepts and strategies and ideas are coming from. They are coming from the South, sisters. They are coming from young women. They are coming from the struggles that were once on the margins of our movements, and they are coming from the ground. They
The young feminists were pleasantly shocked by the rounds of questions directed at us.

The AWID forum’s focus on “The Power of Movements” had a special meaning for me as a 20-something feminist activist. As a young woman in Somalia, I was stoned to death in a public stadium with a thousand spectators. She was reported as being a 23-year-old adulteress. The media said, “she looked much older.”

Big leaps forward. Are you ready? We have a few simple tasks ahead of us. We only have to reframe, shift, and create new trajectories of feminist political analysis and practice. We have to reclaim and reinvent mobilizing and organizing strategies that are the foundation stones of movement building. We will all go forth and think and act much more clearly and strategically to reach out to our constituencies, build bridges across and between them, and act intergenerationally and intersectionally to strengthen our collective power and the power of our movements.

We are going to seriously address ways of making our organizations, our movements, and our work truly intergenerational, not by paying lip service, but by struggling together to realize this goal. We are going to grapple with our own deep structures of power, and struggle to create better rules of engagement that enable us to treat each other well, and to harness the diverse strengths and experiences without the kinds of hierarchy and dominance that have damaged us in the past. We are going to learn to recognize the forces that, as Pregs said, divide us from ourselves and from each other. We are going to overcome all forms of discrimination!

We have seen the birth of at least two major exciting new initiatives. The young feminist fund was born right here at this forum. And so, it seems that Hilary Clinton, You’ve come a long way baby. Building movements is like a relay: it’s about knowing how to hold the stick tightly in your hand, not letting it fall down, but also knowing when to pass it on and to whom to pass it on.

Absences and silences: a huge absence if not silence that many of our sisters experienced was the lack of a stronger attempt to discuss around economic rights and the implications of the implosion of the neoliberal model and the structures it had put in place over the past 20 years. Well, there can’t be a revolution if women can’t eat, find water or work. As gender advocates and women’s rights activists working to improve the lives of women and the people they love worldwide, there is need for a much stronger focus on alternative [economic] models, especially alternative feminist paradigms. And a strong sense that this vital discussion must be present at the next forum.

I think there was also a feeling that there’s a need, or that there was an absence of, a more intersectional approach to all our discussions, whether we are talking about conflict or disability, or fundamentalisms or sexuality. We have to learn to do that much better.

There was also a sense of an absence of a discussion of the huge role that the mainstream media is playing in shaping our understanding of feminism and women’s rights. The huge role [the media] plays in controlling public perception and opinion about the issues we care about. There was a devastating example of this: a little thirteen-year-old girl from Somalia, was stoned to death in a public stadium with a thousand spectators.

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