Editorial: Making Change Happen

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Beside a starlit Bangkok river I sat with over a thousand feminists from around the world watching an open air stage filled with a beautiful talented transsexual and transgender troupe in Marilyn Monroe pink and pearls performing Helen Reddy's 'I Am Woman', the song of my early Australian feminist days. We were at the celebration dinner of the AWID Forum, greeting friends, discussing the many conversations of the day, smiling across a sea of table and glasses. As young Thai men in crisp white sailor suits served me cocktails, I, and others at my table suddenly needed a reality check.¹

What were we as feminists engaged in the struggle for economic and social justice doing in these luxurious surroundings? Even as we sang along, were these beautiful singers from Malaysia, The Primadonna, looking like real live Barbie dolls, symbols of all we did not want our daughters and younger generation of women to be, celebrating or making fun of 'our' feminism? We had had to learn to be strong and invincible as the song said, and we had denounced curves, high heels, the pink and pearls in order to become women not defined by patriarchies of popular culture. Was it ok for 'others' to perform this kind of fetishized female body? Who was choosing what? Who was pleasuring whom? How different were 'we' from the western men who came to watch similar sex shows? Was this an orientalizing, an exoticizing of a most sophisticated sort? What did it mean as a diverse feminist experience? What changes were being made to have at the heart of the largest global feminist forum transgender, transsexuality, pleasure, identities and difference?

Welcome to just one of the many exciting, puzzling and energizing experiences of the AWID Forum, a feminist space where the connections, the contradictions, the injustices, the pleasures, diversities and the multiplicity of experiences of how women are making change were celebrated, argued and enjoyed. It is a great privilege for *Development* to be able to share with its readers and with participants of the Forum, some of those discussions. As Joanna Kerr said in her opening speech, the Forum was a unique experience for each person, and I would add it can provide a unique multifaceted set of resources from which all of us grappling with the world's deep inequalities and injustices can learn.²

The AWID Forum³ dealt with the darkest of issues, exposed the core of gender injustice, unremitting poverty and workers' oppression, violence, the pain of violated bodies, the scourge of HIV and AIDS but it did so with a difference. The methodologies, analysis

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and skills showed a deep and mature understanding of the body, heart and soul in the women's movements. This was not a tired old conference, same people, same ideas, same despair and confusion of so, here are the problems, so where do we go from here? No, the Forum was about: so as we are lucky enough to be here, understanding the failures, contradictions, the struggles and our hopes; let us take up our responsibilities and together create a future that we are understanding, shaping and changing. Bangkok at the Shangri-La Hotel of all places was where it was happening. It was where the energy was, and it swept us up in a multitude of ways, from the big screen plenaries, the videos, the intense conversations, the exchanges, the networking, the meetings, the shows, the dances, the early morning swims and yoga...

No wonder so many of us came home tired by the travel but exhilarated by a sense of solidarity, full of energy in how 'the I is part of the we' in all its many splendoured diversity. We came home ready to continue, to put into practice what was learnt, to keep moving, to keep changing.

In pulling very quickly together this issue of *Development* I am keenly aware of how much the AWID Forum inspired and helped make change happen for women. The articles are notably different from traditional *Development* issues. They are shorter, reflective and yet strident, they speak with a deep sense of knowledge and hope. The authors, for all their clarity, are writing on behalf not only of themselves but also for many others. It is evident that they write with those voices in mind, mixing analysis with experience, profound reflection with innovative ideas for how to move forward. Many had used multi media in their presentations, which we alas, cannot capture, indeed it points to the need to embrace more than a journal medium for effective communication in today's world. We have tried to reproduce images but the presentations flatten out with no audio or moving image. However, they all speak of how to make change, with no blue print, and lots of knowledge and many questions and ideas of how to move forward. Even in the criticisms of the movement, there is an all-embracing sense of be-

longing to a community and knowing that feminists are making change happen.

The journal reflects my selection as the Editor, guided by many conversations of those at the Forum and with the support of the AWID staff and three volunteers.⁴ The aim is to draw out not some of the current directions feminists are taking now and also to propose what could be at the basis of an inter movement, inter disciplinary, inter generational discussion across the board of those working for economic and social transformation.

Yvonne Underhill-Sem in her presentation at the plenary called for a 'feminist embodied understanding' that would unleash our possibilities to 'think, say and do' and to work from an 'enflamed consciousness of embodied justice'. Gendered bodies, their ages, their abilities, their differences, their uses, their misuses, their nourishment, their interpretations, their oppressions, their values, their sexualities and their pleasures were central to many discussions. It was as if we had stripped ourselves down to the core to try and unpack all the meanings of politically living a female body however that was transfigured. The living female body needs nourishment, care, clean air, food and water as well as social fulfillment, pleasure, and freedom from exploitation. To understand embodied feminism was an exciting and difficult challenge. We live in what is often an increasingly disabling intrusive political economic and social environment that could invite more questionings than answers, as Anita Nayar points out. And yet here we are demanding of ourselves empowered actions that respond to our anger as well as calls on our collective capabilities to make good material insufficiencies.

Yet, as Pramada Menon said, 'Unless we question and challenge our own understanding of issues, change will not happen'. My vignette of the Forum Dinner illustrates that sexualities, identities even gender rights were certainly being questioned. As the Primadonna performances underlined, the concept of binary gender is long past, as are heterosexual norms. Even defining ourselves only through sexual choice was questioned. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual, Queer, Confused are political categories of self but also of survival and well-being. As Pinar Ilkkaracan com-

ments, 'sexuality is a cross-cutting issue that lies at the heart of disempowerment of women. So if women are to be empowered, work on sexuality is essential'. Post Forum, Susie Jolly commented to me, 'The challenge was out there of how to go beyond sexual identities ... to a movement based on demands and desires rather than identities – destroying the gender system rather than just shoring up the interests of one group within it'.

Politics around the body encompasses not only sexuality but also the scary and difficult issues around security, science, bio and nanotechnology. Marsha A. Tyson Darling pushed us to the cutting or bleeding edge of new technologies for women, to what is alarmingly no longer the futuristic science of genetic technologies, where bodies are being entered into, altered, computerized, measured and watched in a world where economic and social justice norms are not in place. It is not just the question of missing women, it is a question of missing bodies, altered norms, cloned beings, prolonged lives for some, drastically shortened experimented upon lives for others. Underhill-Sem, Tyson Darling and Chat Garcia Ramilo in their contributions to the journal sound the alarm bells for feminists of the raging revolution in genetics that is being played out in women's bodies and threatens to privatize all forms of life.

Who draws the lines on the norms of a body's ability? I vividly remember in the last plenary where many women from the floor spoke, of how disability is a core feminist issue – the normalizing, control and regulation of bodies by medicine and science – and from where I sat I found myself clapping by waving my hands in the air along with the translators for the women seated in front of me. It reminded me that one reason why the Shangri-La Hotel had been chosen was because it was wheel chair accessible – a point echoed in Jana Mairui and Lydia Shula as well as Menon's thoughts on disability.

The reality of the worker's lives, the sweat and blood of their bodies that made the luxurious services of the Shangri-La and surrounding hotels for the participants was brought home to us by Junya Lek Yimprasert when she reminded us that Burmese workers would spend 5 months salary to have one night in the Forum's hotel. There is a

chain of women workers around the world who are paid minimum wages to produce bras that cost 20 baht to produce but cost 30 dollars to buy in the West. We were confronted not only with the huge injustice of global capitalist production chain but also our role as consumers in it. Where does our food and clothes come from, on whose bodies do our life styles rest? These were difficult questions to discuss face to face with the representatives of the unions of the clothing industry who were there. In contrast, the Forum conference bags were works of art, each unique, each beautiful, and we knew that the women who made them were paid a fair price. How could it be that we lived in a world where value and appreciation of fine work and a fair exchange was replaced by market values that dismissed these women's abilities, lives and futures? What was our role in that struggle?

Cyberbodies were also in great evidence at the Forum, together with young talented women, who celebrated, danced and used technologies in ways us 'youngish' women were still learning about. The instant history of the Forum was captured by two teams of young women – and screened at the last plenary. The AWID website (www.awid.org) has already loaded up films, presentations and photos. I sat in rooms where sophisticated power points flashed through images of women's histories, illustrated in silence the main argument. There were workshops on how whole libraries in once inaccessible elite universities are now available on websites to be used by teachers in schools to counter oppressive use of women's bodies. Films of earlier feminist events were used to introduce a session, with snazzy introductions, where, somewhat eerily, many of the audience were on the film. Barbie dolls were amusing protagonists in short feminist films. Alongside the massages and yoga for tired bodies were the computers available to chat with your family.

Young women led conversations about networking through blogs and websites. Listservs seemed clumsy and old fashioned. Professional and sophisticated use of technology pervaded, and young women took the lead. It was notable that young women set the direction in many Forum conversations. They were there, fully engaged

in defining the parameters of the intergenerational dialogue and willing to take up their place as leaders and mentors as Erin Leigh's contribution attests. Older women had to take note! It is important that different generations share their histories, older women need to mentor and be mentored as the Kenyan experience related by Nyambura Ngugi shows. Older or self-proclaimed 'youngish' women need to work out how to give space, learn about aging bodies with dignity, and, together with young women enjoy how to give and receive many kinds of wisdom.

Ill bodies, violated bodies, bodies whose voices are silenced were also part of the conversations, but perhaps not enough. Women from Africa, there in large numbers underlined the need for feminists to look at HIV and AIDS squarely as a feminist issue – the reproductive rights and health agenda must take HIV and AIDS on as a core issue for feminist global politics. The interconnections around poverty, gender sexuality and HIV and AIDS can and must be made and inform the priorities for the feminist movement.

The taboos around sexuality have long been pulled down in the global women's movement but one that is only now tumbling is the taboo around money. One major message was about demystifying money, looking at who has it and how they use it, and taking into account the historical relationship of the women's movement to money and of course the power it has. The AWID initiative 'Fundher-money watch for women's rights' that was launched at the Forum raised many of these questions – and brought out the importance of women making change in the donor world, improving access to funding globally and building the legitimacy of women's rights organizations and movements to use and think about money. The next issue of *Development* volume 49 no. 2 will feature some of that work together with other studies that are 'tracking the money' being used for social movements and NGOs.

The Forum showed that there are many, many ways to bring about change. Some, like Medea, thrilled the audience with the brassy and funny yet deadly serious activism of Code Pink and there was a buzz of people looking to organize in protests to end the Iraq War on March 8th after she

spoke. Others felt there has been a break through in women talking about faith and secularisms moving out from under the yoke of different patriarchal religions as Shareen Gokal's contribution shows and the honesty of Yanar Mohammed from Iraq's presentation revealed.

The Forum showed that the injustice of globalization, the institutionalized discrimination and racism the widening North South divide are all at the centre of feminists' every day struggles. Whether they are: trying to keep their community together despite environmental destruction; searching for jobs in global markets that devalue their worth and diminish their livelihoods; fighting conditions in the home, work place or public spaces that threaten their bodily integrity; or are out on the streets denouncing the WTO, the war in Iraq, risking arrest, stunner guns they are making change happen. And then again there are the women and some men who are burrowing away in development institutions, universities, newspapers and journals and NGOs pushing for justice not charity as a response to the world's inequities.

Interestingly, the minority group at the Forum were not the typical tokens of big international events, such as Africans or the women from the Pacific, who are living every day on their bodies the global injustices, struggling to ensure environmental integrity for their communities, trying not be co-opted into a market system that would rob them of their dignity and choices (see Noeline Nabulivu and Sylvia Tamale's powerful pieces in this journal). In the end, it appeared to be the institutional gender and development workers, largely from the North whose felt their voices were on the fringe. What changes have happened to make these women feel on the margin of change? Not an easy or comfortable question to be asking in this journal. Some of the challenges are articulated by Aruna Rao and Gretchen Bloom (writing on behalf of her men) and some of the answers are captured in the articles in particular the evocative renditions of Menon, Enisa Eminova and Lisa VeneKlasen along with the reflections of Everjoice Win and charting of the shift of AWID away from a blur of white faces to a Forum where feminisms of all colours and textures are embraced.

Notes

- 1 These are my thoughts reflecting the conversations I had, I am aware that many enjoyed the show as both fun and liberating.
- 2 Unfortunately Joanna Kerr, Executive Director of AWID could not attend the Forum as she had to travel home due to the unexpected death of her father. It is a tremendous tribute to her leadership and mentoring of many women, of all ages, both in her staff and in the global women's movements, that the show went on flawlessly without her, although her talents, energy and kindness were sorely missed as the warm and spontaneous applause at various plenary moments attested.
- 3 For brief informative reports on the daily plenaries see <http://www.awid.org/forum/plenaryreports.htm#oct.28>
- 4 My thanks in particular to Shareen Gokal of the AWID Staff and AWID Forum volunteers Tammy Krongkwan Trai-tongyoo, Sheryl Beckford and Melissa M. Haniewicz.