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A Conversation with Onyango Oloo at the WSF Nairobi 2007

By Patricia Willis

Abstract

Onyango Oloo, National Coordinator for the Kenyan Social Forum 2006 and who also served on the Nairobi Organizing Council for the World Social Forum Nairobi 2007, has gained notoriety as an outspoken advocate for women's leadership at the World Social Forum. His widely circulated article, "Gendering WSF Nairobi 2007 - Conceptual Underpinnings," raised expectations among some readers about the role women would play at the Nairobi forum. In this interview, completed in the midst of that event, Onyango reflects on the evolution of his own feminist consciousness and the tactics he feels need to be implemented in order to infuse the WSF with feminist principles.

Keywords: World Social Forum Nairobi, feminism, women's marginalization

Patricia Willis, co-editor of this volume and Social Forum Coordinator for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom talked with Onyango Oloo on the afternoon of January 21, the first day of the workshops at the World Social Forum Nairobi 2007. She and Laura had become interested in interviewing Onyango after they read his widely circulated article, "Gendering WSF Nairobi 2007 - Conceptual Underpinnings." Onyango was the National Coordinator for the Kenyan Social Forum in 2006 and was a member of the WSF Nairobi Central Organizing Committee.

Pat: Your words and the sentiments you express in your paper has made a great many women--- feminists---consider you an ally in their struggle to make the WSF more equitable for women. What do you think of that?

Onyango: Well I don't know; I think I just express a lot of things that I have learned from women over the last maybe fifteen to twenty years. So a lot of it [my feminism] is experiences coming from interacting with women who were involved in everything from the battered women's shelters to organizing social movements, immigrant support organizations, and things like that that have given me a different context in terms of gender awareness. So the credit, first and foremost, goes to those women because they have helped to struggle with me and socialize me and have given me a different purpose in terms of fighting for change. That's where I think credit should go.

Pat: How did you become involved with these women's networks?

Onyango: Well, it goes back to almost a quarter century ago when I was in my early twenties here in Kenya. I was training at the University of Nairobi in the social sciences and I wrote an essay. That essay was penned in the aftermath of state crackdown on "dissident" lecturers at the University of Nairobi and other Kenyan universities; they

were detained without trial. So I started writing this essay on the role of students and youth in society - it was tentatively titled "A Plea to Comrades". I did a draft and I was saying that students should take up positions and speak out because it's very important and, talking politically, at that time my immediate audience was fellow university students. So I wrote it in June of 1982 and I put it away in my box file somewhere and it just so happened, coincidentally, that two months later junior members of the Kenya Air Force attempted to overthrow the Kenyan government. At that time the then ruling party had just passed, through constitutional amendment, making Kenya a *de jure* one party state and of course Nairobi University students were among the few people in Kenyan society who were able to oppose it, so of course when we heard that the government had been overthrown, but more importantly, the junior members of the Air Force who were there, who were more or less the same age as the students, and they came to the campus chanting "Power!" and there we were, celebrating and rushing into the streets. Unfortunately, the army, you know in Kenya you have the army, the navy, and the air force; the Kenyan army is most reactionary, most conservative of the armed forces. So the army came and crushed the coup and restored the president and, as an immediate aftermath, the university was ordered closed.

Now, I grew up in a city called Mombasa. So we were ordered home and a couple of days later I boarded a train and as I was going to Mombasa, somewhere in the middle [of the journey] between Mtito Andei and Voi, the railway police came on board and starting asking for identity cards, which in the Kenyan context, are a legacy of the colonial period; you can be arrested if you don't have identification. So they were asking for my ID and unfortunately I had to produce my student ID instead of my national ID and that was the beginning of my troubles. So to cut a long story short, I was then taken off the train, taken to the Voi Railway police station, where they rifled through my stuff and they couldn't really find anything, and then they come cross this essay, and because it was naming certain key personalities and, at that time there had been an undergoing movement which was putting out publications on "*Pambana*" which translates as "struggle". So the police, being politically semi-literate, assumed that I had copied parts of that from the underground publications and I said, "No, no, no I wrote this thing. This is my stuff". So, basically, I was brought back to Nairobi and tried for sedition. I had two lawyers who both tried to convince me to plead guilty and I refused. I ended up defending myself but I still got five years in prison. I was taken to a maximum facility which is, maybe, five to ten kilometers from here. It is called Kamiti. So I spent those years in jail. But what happens in Kenya is that you are entitled to one third remission of your sentence; but for the political prisoners after 1983 they were told that they would have to serve the full term. So I sued the Kenyan government in 1986 with the support of Amnesty International which had adopted me as a prisoner of conscience soon after my incarceration. The first case attempt to sue the state was knocked out on a technicality, but just about four to six months before the Court of Appeal ordered my immediate release I completed my sentence, they awarded me damages and I was released, but I was not safe in Kenya because they wanted to re-arrest me. So I fled across the border to Tanzania. I went to the United Nations Commission for Refugees and at that time there was a pact amongst the three states Kenya, Ghana, and Tanzania that "if you keep out our dissidents, we'll keep out yours". So what would happen is that I would get asylum as a refugee but the Tanzanians would say, "You have to look for a country of resettlement".

So that's what happened: I stayed in Tanzania for a year and at that time there were only two countries in the world, Benin and Canada, that were offering to take up these Kenyans basically hovering around with no place to go. So that's how I ended up in Canada in November 1988. Some of the South African exiles I had met in Tanzania, had hooked me up with their ANC comrades and as soon as I landed in Toronto I met with many people—Palestinian comrades, with the Canadians and American activists including people who had resisted the [Vietnam] war in the sixties and that's how I got involved with radio, and at that time the people who were running the collectives were women or feminists who were involved in different aspects of [liberation movements], people who were lesbians, bisexuals. Then through that I got involved with community organizing in the broader black community and the left wing community, and of course with the Kenyan exiles.

So that's where I met many of these people who were themselves leaders in their own right and it [my feminism] came from little things that women pointed out to me repeatedly like for example: when people are meeting, who gets to take the minutes; who gets to make the tea; little things like how men take up so much space, not just in talking but even in proximity; they just crowd out somebody's personal space, and men do this without thinking. When a woman is speaking everybody is sort of scribbling or whispering, having side conversations, nodding off and then when she stops they act as if she didn't say a thing. And even in terms acknowledgement, of eye contact, even going to a women's meeting and what my friend calls the "politics of furniture". So it has been a lot of experiences from the left and of course realizing that, first, that men are very much on the defensive. So they find ways of justifying their acts.

My sister comrades did a lot to sensitize me, but you see I was radical to begin with, but then it was different and then that whole issue about practicing your politics in your personal life, the whole thing about the personal is political is something which, working with women, in reality situations. For example, men don't have a problem saying "Let's meet in this pub at 8:30", forgetting that some of the people expected to attend that night meeting could be single parents who have to pick up the kids at 6:00 or they start paying a dollar per minute. Or telling somebody "We're going to meet today not tomorrow" and nobody's been able to make arrangements for childcare, and things like that. So those are the kind of things, and one must say, each part of the world has contributed something to the pool of the progressive thinking and progressive experiences. Being in North America certainly opened up my mind much faster. Of course I can compare to some of my Kenyan comrades back here at home who have not had experiences, for example, around sexuality, sexual orientation, those kinds of things. A lot of people in Kenya, who consider themselves radicals, when it comes to issues of gays and lesbians, are extremely homophobic and I know that I had to come out of that experience, because for example, when we were in prison, men having sex with other men, it was mostly in the context of prostitution, and so some of us were young and witnessed older prisoners sexually exploiting younger prisoners. We were incensed and outraged and waged campaigns against men having sex in prison with other men.

Like I said, there were people working in the radio station, there were people from that whole spectrum: lesbians, gays, transsexuals, and all the permutations in between. The struggles of gays and lesbians opened that space [in my mind] on so many issues and even in terms of the women's movement issues, around choice and abortion. But people

would say to me, "You've been confused by all those Canadians". But again, I can attribute to the progressive movement, not just women, but North American social movements. And so, even the peace and anti-war movement helped to transform my social and political consciousness. Having worked in social justice organizations where there was consensus decision making approaches, rotating chairs in meetings and so on; so I am still blown away when I see many NGOs and social justice organizations stuck in very hierarchical models and structures.

Pat: So what you did was to incorporate the social change motives of many of the progressive movements, including the feminist movements, into your personal philosophy of life.

Onyango: Of course, absolutely.

Pat: But many, many men have not done that. They have incorporated the anti-war movement, or the anti-global movement, or the indigenous people's movements into their own social protests, but not the feminist movements, but you did that.

Onyango: Yes and I guess also it is because I had a friend, a Kenyan woman, who went to Canada as a domestic worker, who told me straight up that she was bisexual and if I could deal with that then we could start having a conversation. So that was the reality from day one and, for her to say "I am a feminist" and her experiences in terms of the workplace, and in terms of interacting with people, and that was her first political identity, as a feminist, and then because of her sexuality, many of her friends were lesbian, bisexuals; we all became friends.

Pat: We need more men who have undergone processes like yours.

You mention in your article that African women have made substantial inroads in principal organizing positions in the various African social fora and the WSF Nairobi, but yet not parity. What influence do you think the Mumbai WSF 2004 might have had on African women's success here? I wonder if the African and Indian women are more adamant, more vociferous, more radical than, for example, western women currently seem to be.

Onyango: Because in terms of the pioneers, the people who have jumpstarted the Kenyan Social Forum, people at the core were women, not all, but at least women are very much a part of that core. For example, up until last year, the only member of the International Council of the WSF was a Kenyan woman - Njoki Njoroge Njehu -who used to be based in Washington, who was actually the director of the "50 Years is Enough" campaign but she has since relocated here and heads an organization called Daughters of Mumbi which mobilizes with a lot of rural women's networks, and Wahu Kaara who has been an activist for a very long time. Her late husband was a fellow exile; we were together in Tanzania together, and she has made a name for herself as an activist in her own right. So when people started to organize the Kenyan Social Forum- Njoki, Wahu, and others brought in the networks that were reaching to lot of women. So women have been part and parcel of the Kenyan Social Forum.

Incidentally, Wahu is often conflicted herself when it comes to defining herself as a feminist, but then when she speaks, when she talks, she obviously, echoes and articulates clearly feminist positions – so I think it is sometimes the idea, the perception of what a feminist is. So then in her particular case she is also dealing with a lot of careerist women who talk about the flavor of the month, so to speak, talk about gender parity but are clearly not grounded in organizing women from the grassroots to empower themselves. Wahu is one of the people who helped start a group called Kenya Debt Relief network (KENDREN) which is one of the founding and constituent members of the Kenya Social Forum. She has very strong connections with the women in the countryside, across the country, very much part of the debt campaign. Wahu came about it from that network. You find a lot of groups that have a gender element to them but the majority of Kenyan women live in the countryside. Many activists here work in a certain milieu which is very self-referenced. So the language is not rooted in communities of women who are trying to change their lives and empower themselves.

So what eventually became the Kenyan Social Forum still had a lot of male culture, even in terms of how meetings were run, in terms of who has the voices and who makes the decisions and things like that.

Pat: Why would you say that is the case?

Onyango: I guess because it is a reflection of Kenyan society. It is basically very misogynist, very sexist, and I have seen women who are very strong, very articulate, who take no prisoners, but I have seen the same women when they get a male partner in their lives they retreat. Even within the Kenyan Social Forum, otherwise very strong women often defer to some of their male colleagues due to a variety of cultural, social and patriarchal factors. These are the kinds of things that are not formalized but are socialized. And then the networks, the old boy networks exist also and the old boys have stronger connections than the women when it comes to their networks and other connections. A simple example is who gets to go abroad, who gets to go to Porto Alegre. Somebody will know somebody because this person funded their NGO and the woman will be working from an NGO that did not get funded, so that kind of relationship which is more subtle, will determine who calls the shots. Sometimes we find that, like myself, I am sometimes the loudest feminist voice in the room because women have seen how they are silenced, stigmatized, and stereotyped whenever they raise issues to do with women, "Oh you're raising this because you are a woman" or for me "You are raising this because you have just come back from Canada and that will too wear off and you will become a real African man again" and sometimes women being literally shut up with "This is not on the agenda" "Do you have a feminist axe to grind?' and that kind of stuff. A lot of women have told me that in order to make peace, or because of the jibes, the sneers, the put downs, or snide remarks, they shut up. Or a frequent comment in Kenyan circles, seminars, workshops is, we have a meeting of say four guys and they say, "Oh, we have to have some gender balance, Pat, can you come up here?" And that is gender balance. And that is so common. Or this committee will say, "We need a woman".

Pat: *A* woman?

Onyango: Yes, *a* woman, and you know sometimes I see a lot of women shrugging and saying "Here we go again". So when we are supposed to be, quote, politically correct there will always be that superficial attitude, "But how can you say that. Look at X" and they have meant a woman who with a high profile within the NGO, the civil society organization and so on. At the end of the day we have to remember that we are still living in a society that really treats women with contempt, I mean just see what men do in public, ministers with their wives and mistresses, and for example when it comes to divorce.

Pat: It is also an immense task I imagine to include women from rural areas in Africa in the WSF who have limited access to organizing tools such as internet, social forum committees, etc. in the large numbers that they represent in the population. This is also one of the populations most severely affected by neoliberal entities and policies such as World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, structural adjustment policies, trafficking, health problems, AIDS, raising orphaned children either from war or from AIDS. What has the WSF Nairobi done to get these women to the WSF Nairobi and to have their voices listened to?

Onyango: It has happened because of some of the networks, mostly working in small networks, rural communities, small farm and fisherfolk and they have brought a lot of women, especially around land. AIDS, which has affected mostly women, has brought a lot of women into the WSF process. Another network which has been heavily involved is Madre which is based entirely in the countryside. And another network which is very strong is the Kenyan Human Rights Commission. This is not so much rural women, but working class women. So the networks that make up the umbrella have brought in various communities. I must say that Joyce Mulama of IPS (Inter Press Service- a non profit news agency. They are the ones who did Terra Viva during the social forum. Website: http://ipsnews.net/). She's a Kenyan journalist, and through her work she has highlighted a lot of stories involving women. And you know that one of the biggest issues now includes rape and violence against women. So that has also brought in those networks and that's how they have gotten involved.

Pat: In your article you write about the magnitude of violence against women and you deplore this condition of life for women. There have been several reports of rapes at WSF events (2005, 1-2 women) but rumors of over ninety rapes which, I think somehow speaks to the power of fear that our various patriarchal societies create in women around rape. You mention several actions which the WSF Organizing Committee could take to make the WSF sites safer for women? What of your suggestions has been implemented here in Nairobi and what other concrete suggestions might you have for the WSF Organizing Committee?

Onyango: Well what we did, of course we collaborated with Roselynn Musa, who works with FEMNET, what we did was a joint project particularly in northern Africa, which was sent out to a couple of funders so they could be resourced. But some of these other suggestions, we have tried to put them through the different commissions doing the work. You know there are seven commissions doing the work: media and publicity, social

movements, resource, program content, methodology, youth, and culture. So in all of those we are trying to integrate gender approaches and so that when it came to resource and fundraising we specifically fundraised to see how to implement those things. When we talk about media and publicity we talk about the media portrayal, the messages, the language. I had suggested an information booth and information kits talking about that whole issue. I have not seen that suggestion implemented. You have to understand that in making that suggestion I realize that it's a terrain where there are a lot of struggles. Also, I don't know if it was happenstance, but maybe a month after I made that suggestion I got a call from a lesbian couple [from Scandinavia and the Central America respectively] and they said we would like to talk to you. So we met in a coffeehouse and they were trying to make sure that LGBTI has a platform in the WSF. At that time it was very difficult even to raise that issue within the Secretariat but we agreed on a strategy to mobilize and to register some issues to do with safety, most specifically around issues of homophobia. For example one thing that we have struggled for is, there is a group called the Five C's, the Five Centuries Theatre Group because they once did a play called *Five Centuries* which traced a history of Africa from the slave trade through the colonial period and all these isms. So we went with them to India in November and they were part of a cultural troupe which put together what we called "*Made in India*" which was basically a depiction of our political resistance against foreign domination and imperialism using culture. So the LGBTI community has been marginalized, constantly marginalized even in terms of being able to be on the program. So because of my position within the Organizing Committee on the Secretariat, I always am like a little intelligence agent, and I said to the Five C's "Listen there is a meeting, you have to go to it, you have to be there because that is where the decisions are made". I hear from men who are active on the committees. They would not say something which is obviously sexist but they will come up with an ideological sentiment like, they will say "Oh, we like the Five C's but they are so ideologically and politically immature; I don't think we'll use them." So it has been using those kinds of subversive actions which don't appear subversive.

So other ideas have just been shut out because people don't take issues that affect women seriously. You see, I have gotten comments from all over the world about that paper but do you know that within the Secretariat not one single person gave me a comment on it.

Pat: Have they read it?

Onyango: Yes. I circulated it amongst the Secretariat first. Not one person, woman or man, gave me a comment on it. But that silencing, killing certain issues with negligence, is also a pointer that they still are not, not, my voice, as you mention, is not a majority voice. So it has been difficult and like I told you at first that some of my sister comrades, they almost want to get away from it because they have suffered so much. Some of them have said "Listen, we are glad that a guy is doing this". I remember a friendly banter. I'll tell you what it was. One of my co-workers walked into my office and asked me a question about the media. And I responded, but then, I said to him "I just want to ask you something. So and so here knows more about the media than I do. Why didn't you ask her? What do you think that tells her?" And then what the guy said next was "Oh you are just trying to play up with the women" and he proceeded to make more similar comments

to me, such as that I chose to work with some woman because she is more beautiful and other comments like that that would make you throw up. But because people know my position, women have found it easier to come and talk to me about sexual harassment, for example, or inappropriate advances and other things when they feel they are being belittled by men. So that has, in a practical working sense, it has created a good space. That paper does not fully represent the realities, the intransigence of a very male dominated culture which permeates civil society. This is very much present in the World Social Forum Organizing Committee and it has been ameliorated a little bit, but at least at the continental level, women from different parts of Africa are quite strong and active, women like the South African women and others. They have been quite active in spite of circumstances. I can say it [the paper] has been very mixed blessings.

Pat: I will say this Onyango: you are ahead of your time in so far as being a feminist man but that's ok. There are many many of us who are right there alongside with you. So when you feel you are alone in the struggle as a man, remember that you are not.

Onyango: Thank you.

Pat: You're welcome.

The neoliberal policies and practices that have swept the globe ever more increasingly in recent years has, as one of its major components, the reliance on women as: secondary and temporary laborers; as fodder for the sex industries which neoliberal capitalist practice relies heavily upon to feed the rapaciousness of male workers, male militia, and male tourists; and neoliberalism also relies heavily upon the socialized docility of women and girls. Neoliberal capitalism must have these characteristics in women if is to maintain its hegemony and satisfy its most insatiable goal which is profit. Generally speaking, men will not work for the low pay that women are expected to work for; men are not docile; men do not use other men for prostitutes, they use women. The WSF's initial struggle was with neoliberalism and it continues as the main theme of the WSF. Given that women are the basis for much neoliberal action and given the initial and primary theme of the WSF, it would seem a natural conclusion that lead WSF founders and organizers would see this as a major component of neoliberalism, but that does not appear to be the case in any fashion. How is it that the authoritative WSF committees cannot see that women are central to neoliberal practice, to capitalism, to imperialism. Can you comment on this? Shed some light on why the organizers do not see that women are the most used and abused "resource" of neoliberal capital.

Onyango: Well two answers to that. At the conceptual level there is a lot of stated realization of that. For example many groups have linked sex tourism with trafficking and neoliberal policies and practices. There is a lot of realization on the part of organizations around the specialization of labor and the maquiladoras and women. So there is a lot of conceptual analysis from groups. Now there is sometimes lip service paid to these things. COTU, Kenya's trade union confederation, has been a member of the Kenyan Social Forum for almost three years and they have barely attended meetings. Of course they are mostly conservative right wing with entirely male leadership. But like, for example, the Kenyan Human Rights Commission have done research on what happens to women in

the flower farms, how women are raped, sexually harassed, exposed to all kinds of toxins. And they have really done a great job. So you find that there have been snippets of an understanding of the centrality of women and their positions within the global capital order. But I don't think that issue has been owned by the World Social Forum to the extent that it should be. There are people who are active in these issues and they are very vocal, particularly Asian labor activists for women. But I don't think it has caught on at a global level as well as it should have. So that is something where we need much more of a struggle.

Pat: Roselynn Musa suggested a Women's Commission at the World Social Forum. She suggested it as a temporary measure at the Kenyan Social Forum. Was this implemented?

Onyango: No. Basically it was ignored. People were raising their critical eyebrows and basically ridiculing the whole concept by using the standard argument that "Oh, gender and women are cross cutting themes. They are included in each and every commission, they are integral to the work of the Organizing Committee itself so why should there be that?" The sad thing is that very few of the women supported that idea. That was one of the reasons why it didn't go far.

Pat: So these are the women whom you describe in your article as "who in a weird sense of bonding with their African BROTHERS rush to take up cudgels against their OWN SISTERS IN STRUGGLE".

Onyango: I have seen situations where somebody would come up and say something very specific about a person she has been talking about and then even before any man has spoken, the person who rushes with the cudgels in their hands to rubbish another woman is herself a women and they sometimes will be a louder voice than the man's.

No, you see it is interesting because sometimes oppression is personal power. If [a particular woman on the Organizing Committee] is the only woman in the room she would go to the very loud feminist and say, "This is unacceptable, don't belittle me" and she will not take any baloney from men, either, who are trying to be oppressive. But sometimes, and this is more a question of NGO culture, people in organizations can't talk to each other because they are all trying to see who will be in control, who will be the boss. If somebody else comes to the fore and is another powerful voice in addition to myself, in a weird sense they believe their own voice will be diminished. So it is a sad situation because otherwise you would really have more empowerment. So there is an attempt by some to remain the superstar. You have to understand that the World Social Forum in Kenya is dominated by NGOs with their own turf such as AIDS, other gender concerns, the women's political caucus, women and children, whatever, and the sentiment is "How dare you, an NGO, come and talk about women. Who are you to talk?" I can also tell you that what some people say in public, but then, there is what they really believe. There are people who mouth platitudes, very feminist sounding, but they are actually very right wing, very religious and very Christian which can be very oppressive. Just the fact that someone is vocal and a woman doesn't mean that she is a feminist.

Pat: What advice would you have for men (and the women who you describe in your paper as "Sadly, sometimes the most implacable foes of the feminist idea in the Eastern African region are some African women who in a weird sense of bonding with their African BROTHERS rush to take up cudgels against their OWN SISTERS IN STRUGGLE") who refuse to see that they bring with them to the WSF organizing processes the oppressive patriarchal practices and beliefs inherent in their patriarchal societies, thus re-inscribing the oppressiveness of second class status and all which that entails for women? What would you say to those people who are trying to bring gender equality to the WSF organizing processes?

Onyango: What I would say first of all is: one, that they should engage in a lot of self-reflection about their own socialization and assumptions that come from culture and the kind of people they have around them as friends as colleagues, how much they imbibe from them. Secondly, they should also learn from other struggles, you know from the Feminist Encuentros started in Latin America, from the North American feminist movements and if they say "That is too western" they should just go and see how the South African women who have fought at all levels, how they have dealt with the issues around gender and what experiences they have offered to the world and to Africa. And they should also look at the North African and Middle Eastern women who are activists. It is in the interest of men to accept this from their fellow sisters. Women [who take up cudgels against their own sisters in struggle] should not see other women as rivals, as enemies but as part of their own support system. Of course the best example is Margaret Thatcher, of whom many people said "This is a strong woman!" but who, I think she had, at most, two women ministers appointed and who passed some of the most sexist policies which impacted the movement. So they should also learn that just a woman being in power is not meaning that she is progressive or that her policies will empower other women. But most importantly, is to engage with people who at least understand these dynamics. Because the same women know how often they are isolated when they are sitting in power or in government or in state institutions. Just to give you a Kenyan example, the Minister of Health in Kenya is a woman and she was the first woman to run for president in 1997. She has a cabinet counterpart who is the Minister of Internal Security (the same guy who owned the stand at Kasarani that was mobbed by poor slum dwellers during the WSF) who in the colonial period was a police torturer, a colonial torturer. But what happened was this: she made a comment that was critical of that person, a political criticism. So this minister went on television saying "Oh this is a woman. Why is she always jumping up and down dancing" and he named the dance and he comes from another ethnic group and he is older than her. First of all he was very patronizing; secondly his statement was extremely sexist; and thirdly and it was tribal. But this woman is very savvy. So she organized some of the leading Kenyan women and she led a march of women to the minister's office. And she is very physical: she tried to eject the minister out of his office and what happened, and because the media, they hate him, they followed her and women were saying "Come out if you are a man!" and he had to sneak out the back, which didn't make him look very good. Then, of course, she had made a very powerful statement. But she was belittled as a woman, even though they are on the same level of the cabinet, by another member of the cabinet. She was able to make herself even more powerful by getting other women to support her and then, of course,

she got a lot of support from across the bench. Although the flip side of this is that this Minister of Health is completely pro-life. So before you think positively, it is very conflicted. The funny thing about that is that she was pro-choice and then the pressure got her with the carrot and stick strategy.

Pat: Let me tell you about something Onyango. My own experiences after the Boston Social Forum in 2004 left me and many of my colleagues questioning the social forum as a venue for feminist work. At first I was willing to fight the men who refused to give women and "women's issues", such as violence against women, the same primary status as other issues such as water, war, immigrant's rights, etc. which are also "women's issues" but which the organizers appeared to see as gender neutral. But then, that struggle seemed to wear me out as yet one more struggle. I wanted to forget the social forum venue and work only in women's and feminist circles. Then I decided it was no good being a separatist; that if we women left the social forum arena men would have it all to themselves with, however, a substantial number of like-minded women, those whom, as you describe, baffle us over their "weird sense of bonding" with sexist and misogynist men. This is the intellectual process that I went through and many other women have faced similar internal struggles concerning the social forum venue. It makes many of us very sad that we must also fight those who are supposed to be our comrades in struggle. What do you say to the women, specifically feminists, who are close to or have already given up on the WSF and regional social fora because they see the gender inequities as either insurmountable, or they are tired of dealing with men (and those women) who just will not see the inequities, or those women who have experienced separatism as much more beneficial to their feminist work?

Onyango: Well I can say that, first of all, and I will go back to something I said before, that if you look at all those issues, the impact they have on all women is immense, is tremendous and this is the bread and butter of the World Social Forum. It is in the interest of women to stay within the World Social Forum and continue pushing that agenda [VAW] because it has more of an impact on women than any other group in society. Secondly, the World Social Forum is a contested terrain and, not just for women, but those from other social movements are feeling continually frustrated because the space is taken up by these NGOs which can multiply, can steal the language and appropriate the issues of the social movements so that these become part of *their* projects. Then you find that, for example, the corporations try to sneak back in as corporate sponsors. So unless the people stand and fight, I think we could be giving up a lot and again, at least Mumbai was supposed to be a watershed in terms of the participation of women and we should never give up certain gains that have been made, toeholds. And this is a product of the struggle, the nature of the struggle because the World Social Forum is at a crossroads. I was at a meeting of the Assembly of Social Movements. Some people are wondering whether or not the idea should not be transcended as something else. Because we can allow for example, the current Kenyan, president, who is a nice guy, but who is also very colonial to come and tell us how he oversaw the build up of the debt and said there was nothing they could do but now can come back in hindsight as an attack. And yet, there are certain other voices who are more radical.

So I think there is a whole debate of where the social forum is going. We may not have a World Social Forum in five years. And maybe it will be a good thing because people will have looked at, because there are certain things which are intractable in terms of some people never really change because they just pioneer and they have pet issues and pet peeves and that perhaps is part of those struggles. Are we going to do more for social movements as a base or are we going to be more NGO driven, because in the Kenyan context, for example, you find that there are people in those organizations who have never stepped foot out of Nairobi. So I would ask my sisters not to be down because, fortunately, things are beginning to open up to other forces. If women and especially feminists retreated from the World Social Forum, for those women who are just now getting involved, because of those inspirations, I think it would be doing them a disservice.

Pat: I do really appreciate not just your words but your sentiments of solidarity. From myself as a woman and a feminist, and I will only speak for myself here, having an ally in you, a man, in our struggles for full humanity for women, regardless of whether other World Social Forum organizers accept you as a feminist and your feminist struggle, I do. Many other feminists will echo this, I am sure, and we will continue in all of the struggles for equality together because feminism is not just about and for women. It is about and for everyone.

Onyango: Oh thank you. Thank you. There has been a lot of misunderstanding about feminism and some of it has been deliberate because it has been trivialized and slandered and distorted and all kinds of things done to destroy it. I also appreciate the opportunity for talking with you and your readers in general.

Pat: You will become more famous amongst feminists now.