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Reflections on the 3rd International Feminist Dialogues: Notes from a Newcomer

By Janet Conway

Abstract

The World Social Forum Nairobi 2007 was the first time the author participated in the Feminist Dialogues and this article records her first impressions and limited analysis of that event. This article includes discussion of who was in attendance and information on a panel presentation by the African Feminist Forum.

Keywords: global feminism, Feminist Dialogues, Nairobi World Social Forum 2007

In many respects, the 3rd International Feminist Dialogues (FD), which took place in Nairobi, Kenya, January 17-19, in advance of the 2007 World Social Forum represented the best of global feminism. It was a thoroughly international, multi-cultural and multi-racial gathering. There was visible and voluble participation by LGBT feminists, including a contingent wearing T-shirts identifying themselves as the Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya. The event involved 280 self-identified feminists from diverse world regions. There was particularly strong leadership in the event from contingents from Latin America and South Asia, reflecting the political geography of the World Social Forum and the history of the FD. About half the participants appeared to be African, including a wonderfully lively group from South Africa, many of whom were identified with the Treatment Action Campaign, a grassroots activism agitating for poor people's access to anti-retroviral drugs in the struggle against HIV-AIDS.

The event was held in a downtown hotel in Nairobi and was organized by a Coordinating Group of 12 feminist networks, most them working transnationally in regions of the Global South. Two-thirds of the participants were invited, presumably identified through these networks, with the remaining one-third applying on-line. At no point were the participants invited to introduce themselves so, other than those who spoke from the floor, it was hard to know what specific places or in which kinds of organizations or activism participants were rooted.

In my article elsewhere in this issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, I provide some background and history on the Dialogues. This was the first time that I attended. I had been very impressed by the stated vision of the organizers of the FD as a space for transnational dialogue across difference and grounded in praxis, coupled with their desire to intervene as feminists in the World Social Forum. So I went with great enthusiasm and high expectations. Readers can access background documents, texts of many of the plenary presentations, audio files and a photo gallery of the event through the FD's truly fabulous website (<http://feministdialogues.isiswomen.org>).

Marked throughout by impassioned speech and bursts of song and dance, the Dialogues sought to combine celebration, sisterhood and cultural expression with academic presentations, along with plenty of space for contributions from the floor and smaller group discussion. It seemed that the conditions were ripe for a very fruitful and inspiring encounter.

The overall theme of this year's FD was "Feminists Transforming Democracies: Visions and Strategies." A major opening panel addressed the limits of liberal, representative democracy and the promise of radical democracy. The speakers were drawn from the Coordinating Group of the FD and came from diverse world regions. While certainly identifying a critical problematic for feminists and offering perspectives from Latin America, Africa and Europe, this session disappointed, and in terms that unfortunately recurred throughout the event. It was long on critical analysis, abstracted from any concrete activist practice anywhere, and short on options, actions or hope. This was the first in a series of disconnects: this one between highly-abstracted, academic contributions from the front of the room and the preoccupations of many participants who spoke from the floor, and notably not about or in response to the panel presentations.

The morning of the second day was dedicated to a panel on the African Feminist Forum (AFF). The AFF is an initiative to create an autonomous, pan-African, and unapologetically feminist space to promote the building of an African feminist movement. Its founding event was held in November 2006 in Accra, Ghana, involved 120 participants, and produced a Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists (www.africanfeministforum.org). The panel reported on this initiative, outlining its history, describing the Accra event and reviewing the tenets of the Charter. This panel was a highpoint in its focus on Africa and its snapshot of a certain kind of African feminism and its priorities, preoccupations and strategies. However, being in Africa in a discussion of African feminism, I was surprised not to hear any reference to poverty or the survival struggles of poor women, neither in the substantive agenda of the African Feminist Forum nor in their concerns about inclusion. Debates about diversity and the challenges of inclusion in the AFF focused primarily on lesbians and transgender people and on the participation of young women.

One of the roots of this initiative, it seems, was the need to demarcate a self-consciously feminist political space, distinct from the many "women's" activisms in Africa. Panelists insisted on this point and I can understand their desire for a self-consciously feminist political space. I am also an academic who appreciates the need for feminist knowledge production and welcomes an African initiative of this nature. However, the net effect seems to have been the creation of a space/discourse for highly educated, urban and professional women, in which neoliberalism is analyzed as a problem but where the pressing problems of the majority of the continent's women seem quite remote. When the AFF claims to be the hub of feminist movement building in Africa, it raises questions about the particular kind of feminism at work and the limits of its vision and scope.

Over the following day and a half, there were multiple rounds of concurrent thematic discussions in which participants broke into smaller (but still large) groups facilitated by members of the Coordinating Group. Themes included: struggles for economic security and alternatives to neoliberalism; challenging exclusions, discriminations and intolerances; struggles against violence, war and militarism; resurgent nationalism and assertion of ethnic identity; claiming spaces and leadership (in parties, governments, movements, etc.) and feminist organizing and feminist contributions. There were many nuggets in these conversations, pointing to the presence of women working close to the ground, with much experience and rich insights. In these discussions, specific feminist practices rooted in local contexts came into view: the

woman from Zimbabwe working on food security; the one from Zambia whose priority is poverty; Florence from Kenya who is dedicated to capacity-building at the village level; Mairo from Nigeria whose group is training local imams in women's rights.

There were clearly many participants like these in the Feminist Dialogues: both self-identified feminists and deeply embedded in frontline work at the grassroots, with all of its contradictions. The experience, knowledge and insights of these feminists came through, but only in fragments. There were also many participants in the FD who are working primarily in transnational networks, in feminist NGOs, in foundations or in universities. The organizers assumed a difficult task in assembling such a disparate group and trying to promote dialogue and reflection among them when participants are speaking quite different discourses. The challenges may be at least as much about process and communicability as about analytical coherence or political agreement.

The Feminist Dialogues are reaching in the right direction in striving to promote critical reflection about the state of global feminism and in recognizing that feminists have got to find their way back to movement activism, both as feminists and in the company of other critical social movements. This agenda is at its early stages. The very fact of the Feminist Dialogues and their successful elevation of feminist presence and visibility at the 2007 World Social Forum, particularly through their organizing an incredibly dynamic Women's March, suggest that some steps were taken in these directions in Nairobi.