

**World Social Forum: Integrating feminism and women activists into  
visions and practices of “another world”  
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The World Social Forum brings together activists and movement leaders from around the world who are fighting against neo-liberalism and for economic and social justice. It began in 2001 in Brazil, when the forum's phrase 'Another World is Possible' was born. It is “a place of experimentation, learning and expression of global social movements” offering “a new utopian vision - a vision that has almost disappeared in recent decades” (Vargas 2005:107).

But women's rights and gender equality have not naturally emerged within this vision. At the first forum, although women made up 54% of the participants, 85% of those in the most important, 'official' panels were men (Vargas 2005). Over the course of the next four forums, feminism made increasing gains in both visibility and recognition, contributing to reform of the WSF structure in 2005, from a largely top-down structure to a broader, bottom-up methodology for organising panels. Women gained a more visible presence in official panels and seminars and at the fourth forum in 2004, in Mumbai, feminists held several self-organised panels which encouraged interaction between movements. These 'feminist dialogues' were to return at subsequent forums and helped to “broaden the spectrum of feminist action and allow us to advance, from struggles for the democratisation of gender relations, to feed into anti-racist, anti-homophobic struggles, or those for economic justice, or for a healthy planet, for cultural symbolic transformations” (Vargas 2005:110).

However, advocates of gender equality have struggled to 'mainstream' gender within the core of the WSF. The fifth forum in 2005 was the first time that gender featured within the forum's thematic axes, appearing as one of five cross cutting axes (Navarro and Silva 2007). Without gender as an integral feature, the organisation of separate feminist spaces can imply a space for 'excluded' groups to discuss 'their' issues, as a pose to discussing gender as an integral part of the main sessions on, for example, the labour market or trade (Obando 2005). The idea of the WSF as an inclusive space was further undermined by incidents such as the sexual assault of young women in the

youth camp of the fifth WSF in Brazil (Obando 2005), exposing the extent to which women's safety had not been considered in planning the forum space.

The WSF in Senegal, 2011, was attended by 75,000 delegates from 132 countries (Devers, 2011). While many of these delegates were women, an observation study by the organisation Genre en Action found a gender divide in terms of attendance of sessions, with sessions not explicitly focusing on women's rights involving "delegates of more than 95% men, and the issue of gender was not raised in discussions" (Devers 2011:3). Meanwhile sessions focusing on women's economic empowerment and rights were attended largely by women delegates. After the cancellation of several venues at Dakar, an unofficial 'women's tent' emerged some distance from the main event, organised by the World March of Women (Winston 2011). Women gathered here each day to discuss a range of topics including conflict in Senegal, gender-based violence, organising around sexuality, and HIV/AIDS. However "whilst some applauded the tent's spirit, others worried that it stood as a symbol of women's issues being marginalised in the wider context of the forum" (Winston 2011:online). In Dakar there was symbolic progress in the WSF taking an explicit stance against violence against women, as the International Council expelled a male delegate for having physically attacked a woman delegate, banning him from both the Dakar and future forums.

The most recent WSF took place in Tunisia in March 2013. There were 11 thematic axes, one of which mentioned gender:

"For a human society, based on the principles and values of dignity, diversity, justice, equality between all human beings, regardless of genders, cultures, age, disabilities, religious beliefs, and based on the respect of individual and collective, civil and political, economic, social, environmental and cultural rights; and for the elimination of all the forms of oppression and discrimination based on racism, xenophobia, caste systems, sexual orientation and others."

The forum itself commenced with a plenary on women's rights, which was full to capacity with delegates. There were also daily sessions on various women's rights themes including women's past and ongoing role in the revolutions in North Africa, and Tunisian women's struggles. The marked change in the visibility of feminist voices and women's rights struggles was due to persistent advocacy by women in the forum planning process. As Gina Vargas, a member of the International Council commented "it was very impressive to see how the Tunisian women managed to put gender issues in the centre of this forum since the beginning (interview by Jessica Horn, 28 March 2013).

As well as emphasising women's rights, feminists within the WSF have also brought an intersectional perspective, achieving the gradual inclusion of cross-identity and cross-movement dialogues and diversity in panels and presenters:

“At the beginning there were workshops of ten men, all white and all old no women. One of the things we have been doing within the WSF as Articulacion Feminista Marcosur [a Latin American feminist network and International Council member] is what we call the Intercultural Dialogues where we sit together as trade unionists, lesbians, transgenders, transvestites, indigenous, afro descendants - to highlight the issue of the intersectionality of women. In the WSF more and more movements have women in them and these women bring different perspectives on feminism which we all learn from” (Gina Vargas, interview by Jessica Horn, 28 March 2013).

Although feminists and women delegates still have to negotiate and advocate for visibility in the WSF, the space itself does provide a useful platform for networking between feminists, making regional and international connections and strategising on future actions:

“The World Social Forum (WSF) is an open and significant space for African women activists and feminists to meet and link with other social movements and civil society organisations that propagate another alternative world that is free of neo-liberalism and any form of imperialism” (Norah Matovu-Winyi, then Executive Director of FEMNET, Kenya).

“Seeing how women mobilise around political issues in Tunisia has been important. In Burkina Faso women's demands tend to be focused on social concerns, and don't always take on this political approach” (Interview with Roukiattou Ouedraogo, Jessica Horn, 29 March 2013).

Looking broadly however, the WSF continues to grapple with how to fully integrate women's rights and women's voices and participation in shaping definitions of “another world” and in building gender-inclusive practices in its own conceptual outlook and organising methods.

## **References**

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