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HOW CAN INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS INFLUENCE THE MAIN CENTRES OF DECISION MAKING?

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I am thrilled to be here, in snowy Geneva, and be part of this exciting conference – particularly as this is on the heels of my participation in the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre. My intention is to share some of the insights gained in that large scale event – but in particular to address one main question: How can international women’s movements influence the main centres of decision making? In tackling this question, one really needs to ask the question – as it says, in your program – “what needs to be done differently, and how to do it?”

In these few minutes I will have time to only discuss three strategies, and these are to:

a) build momentum and consensus for fair globalization that is built upon democracy;
b) move ourselves (as feminists and gender equality advocates) out of the margins of these debates and actions; and thirdly;
c) know where the power is shifting to and organize accordingly.
My first point relates to one key objective – and that is, to transform corporate driven globalization towards a fair globalization.

The “boys” who met in Davos last week are both the architects and most successful beneficiaries of the economic policies and processes that derive from a neo-liberal economic agenda. As we have heard over the past two days, it is this form of globalization and governance system that continues to reinforce power differences, undermine democracy, and deny the rights of women. Almost every aspect of our lives is impacted upon by the proliferation of new technologies, flexible models of employment, foreign products in our local markets, the privatization of social services including water, the diffusion of American pop culture and other manifestations of globalization. As a result, numerous NGO’s, institutes and concerned citizens are lobbying, taking legal action and campaigning for governments, corporations and international institutions to modify their activities.

Porto Alegre, Brazil and the World Social Forum is perhaps the best representation of this powerful reaction to corporate-led globalization. This Forum – which last week gathered almost 100,000 activists, intellectuals and journalists from all over the world – is significant in a number of ways.

First, it represents the leadership of a strong opinion movement that “another world is possible”. In fact in Porto Alegre the results of a global opinion poll were released. Based on data from 20 countries around the world, the majority of citizens believe that globalization made the rich richer and the poor poorer driven primarily by the interests of multinational corporations. The majority of respondents globally felt their fate was decided by external forces beyond their control – and most importantly that global society should focus on social goals first rather than economic growth. In fact, Lula’s overwhelming victory in Brazil is an indication of these sentiments.

The World Social Forum therefore acts as a catalyst to social change by bringing together diverse social movements, despite their differences,
around principles of transparency, diversity and democracy to carry forward dreams, social projects, and economic alternatives. It is a dynamic space for critical information sharing. By being concurrent and strategically timed with the Davos World Economic Forum it represents the possibility of a fair people centred globalization – for example, by advocating for the globalization of wealth distribution as opposed to poverty alleviation (that is, the rich are the problem, not the poor!) In the words of Susan George of ATTAC to Forum participants “we must accept the most difficult task ever undertaken in human history: we have to democratize the international system and force it to serve the needs of everyone”.

However, the World Social Forum has its limitations. As it grows in quantity it is not necessarily improving in quality; by this I mean that there is not sufficient opportunity for deepening or developing alternatives. Secondly, while it brings together global social movements – including the women’s movements, there is still limited cross-fertilization or alliance building across these movements. So while it is very important that feminists are part of the overall movements that are seeking to change the governance and outcomes of globalization, we have a long way to go to ensure that new models are truly gender sensitive. In my opinion, feminists, feminism or gender equality are still relegated to the margins of the World Social Forum – despite the very best efforts of groups like DAWN, World March of Women, or Articulación Feminista Marcosur who serve on the International Planning Committee of the World Social Forum.

The reasons for this tokenism or marginalization, I would argue, have as much to do with profound gender blindness on the part of other social movements as it does with the weaknesses within our own women’s rights community. Which brings me to my second major recommendation – in that we need to address our marginalization within the broader fair globalization movement that is challenging global governance. Here I would give just four problems to address within our work – or what we need to do differently.
First, in many cases, we are actually practicing a politics of exclusion – that is, we feel that we own gender equality work. It is “our feminism but your movements”. In other words, there is a constant tension between our need for autonomy versus inclusion. Put another way, we want our own spaces, analysis and organizations at the very same time we demand that other movements and organizations take on our values, perspectives and approaches. There are not enough of us seeking to build alliances with men, or other social movements (including the peace, economic justice or racial justice movements). In Porto Alegre in fact, my organization (AWID) organized a workshop on just how to build stronger alliances across networks and movements. A colleague from India, John Samuel, stipulated that alliances are built upon shared spaces within which we negotiate shared visions and values. Lack of solidarity is a product of lack of shared spaces. As far as I am concerned we need to resolve this tension – by making feminist spaces more welcoming, but at the same time be honest that we are going to lose certain battles if we want to integrate into broader social movements.

Secondly, as Jules Falquet explained so articulately yesterday, we are witnessing a very serious crisis in gender and development. In fact, through the “NGOization” or institutionalization of the women’s movements much of this work has become non-political, and purely technical. As such, the importance of negotiating political spaces, building up alliances, or pushing political agendas as key strategies for the promotion of gender equality is being diminished. Instead, donors, World Bankers, even many NGOs see so called “gender work” as merely a matter of getting women into projects, ensuring their maternal health, or fixing them into a credit scheme. Here we need to be holding each other accountable as to what really constitutes “good” gender equality work, we need to reclaim feminism, we need to prioritize political and transformative processes and wholeheartedly reject purely technical ones.

Third, I would argue that we have to do more homework (a statement that I too can take some responsibility for). Our demands, for example, for gender sensitive governance structures, economic policies, or
development programs need substance. To demand accountability from our governments or international institutions for “trade policies that incorporate a gender perspective” means nothing. How would trade negotiators know what this means if we do not? Getting beyond symbolic gestures of discontent, we need to determine what kinds of trade, investment and tax policies support women’s rights and then develop explicit strategies as to how they could be implemented. The neo-liberal market system of governance without question does not benefit most of the world’s population; we need to actively change «the rules of the game» and concretize gender-specific principles of economic democracy, human rights and citizen participation in the economy. This conference can contribute to this work, but we have so much further to go.

So those are just three ways in which feminist struggles could move out of the margins and can become more central and actually transformative to the fair globalization movement. However, another key issue to address when considering how can international women’s movements influence the main centres of decision-making (and this is my third main point) is to better understand where the power is and where it is shifting to and then strategize accordingly.

Those of you who know me know that I have taken a strong stance on “Beijing plus ten”. I am adamantly against any meeting of governments at the United Nations in 2005 where the state of the world’s rights of women will be reviewed. The current political environment is simply too antagonistic towards gender equality to allow governments the space to negotiate our rights. The most recent U.N. meetings – like the Children’s Summit or the Sustainable Development conference in Johannesburg give us blatant warnings that the Bush administration is just too powerful and too caught up in pushing back women’s rights – particularly reproductive and sexual rights. The time, financial and human resources therefore that we would all have to expend just to hold the line and not roll back on current UN agreements is too formidable, and frankly would not be strategically used. So let there be a Fifth World Conference on Women – but later, say in 2010.
In fact, for now sites of feminist struggles need to shift beyond the United Nations. This is not to say that we should abandon the U.N. for I recognize its geo-political importance in a world dominated by U.S. hegemony. Nonetheless, in terms of international institutions the World Trade Organization (WTO) holds much greater power and significance for women’s rights in this era of globalization. In the next round of discussions in Cancún, Mexico later this year, discussions will include the expansion of the WTO into more trades and services (like water) as well as in agriculture. Once countries sign onto these agreements they are binding; implemented with determined force to the benefit of the developed world. So we need to be there – trade and investment rules are changing too rapidly for us to be standing in the sidelines, or worse, caught up in the basement of the U.N. fighting over the same “bracketed text” that we advocated for 10 years ago.

Lastly, in terms of power shifts, we are going to witness a rise in fundamentalisms within local and national governments around the world. From India to Italy we see ultra right leaders being elected every day. If we want to influence decision making centres we need to be concerned not just with the macro political space, but in fact, the micro political space. According to my colleague, Gigi Francisco, from DAWN, the more “insidious forms of fundamentalisms will come out of local patriarchies thus creating a great challenge to radical secular local women’s rights work”. Whether it is the committee’s in Cochabamba, health workers in Bangladesh, or villages in Senegal, we will have to intensify our efforts to transform masculinity, household relationships, and attitudes within the workplace through transformative politics in the home and in the street. Global governance won’t change without changing the micro-political space. Local battles are in fact global ones. Action-research therefore becomes ever more significant.

In conclusion, while I may have painted a rather bleak or overwhelming picture I do want to leave you with signs of hope. While the boys of Davos received a considerably larger amount of media coverage than those of us in Porto Alegre, we understand that the mood there was very bleak. It doesn't take much to realize the current fragility of the
economic system, after Enron, Arthur Anderson etc when the theme of their conference was ironically “building trust”. Meanwhile in under 5 years, hundreds of thousands have mobilized under the banner “another world is possible”. Not just in Porto Alegre but regional social forums are being mobilized all over the world. Two weeks ago, a quarter of a million marched in Washington against the war. There is no historical precedent to such global and local mobilization against militarization, fundamentalisms and globalization. New political spaces are opening up, spaces whereby feminism, gender equality and women’s movements will play a fundamental role.

I was personally extremely moved by the lovely words of Indian writer Arundhati Roy (she wrote the prize-winning “The God of Small Things”) in her speech in Brazil last week which I will leave with you.

Another world is possible. She is beautiful … listen carefully and you can hear her breathing.