

## Inter Movement Dialogues: Breaking barriers, building bridges

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**ABSTRACT** *Most social movements accept that their members have multiple identities and therefore diverse issues. So the women's movements accept labour issues, the trade unions acknowledge gay rights, anti race activists take up gender issues. But movements are inherently based on single identity groups and have not been able to create a political culture and practice for this crucial paradigm shift. The Inter Movement Dialogues facilitates this process of discussion with each other.*

**KEYWORDS** *feminist movement; social movements; world social forum; AWID; intersectionality; diversity*

### **The politics of difference and the social movement**

We, usually, define social movements as struggles or sustained actions taken by groups of people coming together around an identity, issues or strategies formulated by a partial or developing ideology. Social movements are named after the groups they have been able to mobilize and so we have the women's movement, the gay rights, the displaced, workers, or people for peace, etc. Movements represent their voices, issues and demands as well as formulate their own methodology and organizations. By the 1980s the women's movement realized that there were serious limitations in using the unitary and homogenous category 'women' as reflecting the essence of all women. Women of colour in the US and UK had challenged the women's movement for subsuming the voices and issues of black women. Similarly, the sexuality rights movements showed that there were many 'genders' and we could no longer use the binary of male/female. The labour movement found that the rapidly changing globalized world had broken down the straightforward divide between the formal and informal sectors and employer-worker relationships. At the same time, many were disputing and even refuting the homogenous category of 'class'. Dalit or lower caste men were confronted with a dalit women's movement. We have realized that although social movements bring together particular groups on the basis of an identity, people live through several identities and respond to them in different ways.

These intra movement challenges dovetailed with post modernist trends for the deconstruction of categories. Post modernists argue that fitting people into one box called gender or class or black do not correspond to the realities of people's lives

and eventually leads to demarcation, exclusion and inequality. People have complex identities. They can be workers, dalits or lower castes; women, or members of religious groups. They have identities based on ethnicity or race, their sexual orientation, as trafficked women or prostitutes. They juggle a mix of these identities during their lives, in their decision-making and actions. Along with such multiple identities, there are also multiple discriminations and privileges. Racial discrimination and a disadvantaged position in the labour market are played out quite different for men and women as well as between women. Advantages and privileges in one context may be disadvantageous in another.

Where does the logical progression of this theorization leave social movement activists? Do they reject politics based on such identification? Some activists who are aware of the different voices within their own movements are critical of versions of essentialisms that define people as a single group. Some veered towards what has been called 'multiple identities' of individuals. Others were unhappy that the concept of multiple identities tends to maintain group boundaries uncritically. In our experience, social movement activists who have to strike a balance between pragmatism, theorization and strategy agree to a rejection of sweeping categorizations but usually retain the concept of categories itself. However, most have not sufficiently come to grips with the politics of differences and the notion of conflicting identities. As movement activists, we need to not only accept differences, diversity and plurality but try to incorporate these ideas within our movements and strategies. This was the underlying motivation behind the organizing of the 'Inter Movement Dialogues' as a methodology for a collective reflection on inter category and intra category approaches to deepen our theory and build bridges across movements.

### **Two Dialogues**

Two Inter Movement Dialogues were held on 19 January 2004 in Mumbai, India and on 28 January 2005 in Porte Alegre, Brazil during the World Social Forum (WSF). A unique international event,

the WSF has been described as 'a socially horizontal space' and a 'village square without an owner' where social activists can meet for reflective thinking, an exchange of ideas and experiences, and the formulation of strategies. Around 1,55,000 people participated in the last Forum in its 2500 seminars and numerous cultural activities. We thought that it was an apt space for the Inter Movement Dialogues and for our contribution to the new methodology of the World Social Forum that seeks to connect and encourage dialogues between different visions and struggles for emancipation.

The idea was to bring social movement activists together on a common platform to critique, appreciate or reflect on their links with issues other than their own in a spirit of comradeship and for a just and equal society. There were no formal paper presentations in both the Dialogues. In the first Inter Movement Dialogues, two activists from four movements, or a total of eight speakers, were drawn from the women's, sexuality rights, labour and dalit/race movements.<sup>1</sup>

They were asked to speak as activists and from their hearts and concern for alliances with other movements. Each speaker was given the opportunity to present how their movement had been able to incorporate class, gender, sexuality and race issues, within its work. The seminar was conducted in a Talk Show format with two moderators and around 800 in the audience.

The first of the four rounds of dialogues started with the activist from the women's movement, presenting how women's movements through the years had attempted to take up issues of dalit/race, sexuality rights and labour movements, the nature of the dilemmas and problems they faced, and the strategies used. The moderator then invited the other three activists from the labour, race/dalit and sexuality movements to respond. The second activist from the women's movement was invited to respond, refute or clarify. Round 2 started with the activist from the dalit movement speaking about their interface with the women's, labour and gay rights movements, and the problems in establishing links. Round 3 and 4 followed the same format with interventions from the two moderators.

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A similar format was followed for the second Inter Movement Dialogues in Brazil.<sup>2</sup>

As organizers, we were amazed and delighted at the response we got from organizations who agreed to be collaborators such as Viva Campesina, Ibase, Focus on Global South, CUT, Peace Round Table (Italy) and IGLT. Although a smaller number, around 330 attended, there was a lively exchange of views between the audience and the panelists.<sup>3</sup>

### The dialogue between feminists

The third Inter Movement Dialogues were different in location and contents. It was held in the conference called 'How does Change Happen?' organized by the 10th Association for Women's Rights in Development, on 29th October in Bangkok, Thailand. The AWID has an international gathering of women every two years. This was not a dialogue between activists of movements but more a dialogue between feminists belonging to different movements, campaigns or groups. In the past two decades, feminists have either had dual memberships in the women's movements and in another social movement or have directly joined a social movement like the antiwar or antiglobalization campaigns. Their personal strategizing comes from the belief in the need for a convergence of different theoretical perspectives and the formulation of a global and combined struggle for a better world. But the process of participation and collaboration with social movements has not been easy for feminists. They have had to struggle to infuse their feminism and issues within other theoretical and strategic goals.

The conversation held at the 'Dialogue between Feminists'<sup>4</sup> was seen as an opportunity to reflect, in a conducive space, on the joys and pains of these alliances and collaborations. Feminists shared experiences in the Anti-Globalization, Anti-Fundamentalism, Anti-Poverty, the International Council of the World Social Forum, Anti-War campaign, Social Movement Assembly, the Feminist Dialogues and the Inter Movement Dialogues. Some of the questions raised were: What lead feminists to join or participate in what are called general or mixed organizations? How did they

deal with the issues of power and working with men? Have feminists succeeded in integrating their own agenda or have they been subsumed under broader agendas? How do they see the women's movement getting strengthened from these varied sites of participation? Is the emphasis on general or broader issues taking feminists away from the need to reach out to 'specific' oppression in women's lives? About 70 women attended the seminar, which was conducted in a fishbowl format with two moderators.

### Walking the talk

New and oft repeated information, arguments, rationales and hopes emerged from the three Dialogues.

There is also some amount of genuine recognition, as against token recognition, of the contribution of feminists for inclusion of issues in joint platforms ...

In most countries, feminist movements have encouraged interventions in order to raise the gender agenda in different campaigns and movements. The moderator of the Dialogues between Feminists outlined these three levels: feminist presence and representation of feminist issues as part of the women's movement; intervention to bring gender to joint platforms and to push for a full feminist agenda including not only issues of reproductive health and violence but also the transformation of society. Most of the speakers were involved in various social movements because there was a need for more women in those movements and because gender issue were neglected; The anti-WTO activist said that she was continuously raising the issue of the numerical presence of women in protests, which usually had a ratio of 1 woman to 10 men. The anti-war speaker said she joined the anti-war struggle in Sri Lanka because she was concerned that the issue of sexual violence was neglected and women were consciously omitted from peace negotiations. Latin American feminists raised the issue of abortion as a democratic concern in order to find greater support for the issue from a broad social movement base.

Most social movements, especially at the leadership levels acknowledge issues like sexual harassment, sexual choice and feminism. But it is still an uphill struggle in mixed organizations for feminists who have to strategize their way into agendas. Latin American feminists raised the issue of abortion as a democratic concern to get more recognition and support for it from general organizations. The Speakers in the Inter Movement Dialogues 1 and 2 were optimistic because most movements had not only recognized and accepted multiple identities and diversity within a single identity group but had gone beyond to emphasize multiple issues.

We, in different movements, have made progress in mutual recognition of issues and groups. But how far have we reached in finding a new way of thinking about our reality and our problems?

It is one thing to recognize issues, and another to incorporate them into your strategic agenda. Many of the speakers in the Dialogue between Feminists felt that most movements still look at gender issues as the concern of women. The activists of the Inter Movement Dialogues explained the various difficulties.

There is no one voice of a movement. There are numerous voices and push and pull factors, which determine the acceptance of various issues. The unionist from CUT, Brazil answered the feminist charge of non support for the legalization of abortion by explaining the collective nature of the movement including a variety of church-based groups, which are against such a position. The sexuality rights activist was quick to point out to the activist from the dalit movement that many transgendered people in India were lower caste, but they, like society, have discriminated and neglected them. In spite of the WSF calling itself a transformative space, women formed only 12 per cent of all the panel speakers at the World Social Forum. Feminists within the Council were dismayed to find that they were not able to make gender one of the central axis of analysis.

It appears that movements are caught between acceptance of other movements' issues and the need to create their own self identities. The gay

rights activist spoke of the overwhelming demand for same sex marriages in gay groups. They did take on the feminist concern of marriage as a patriarchal institution but could not drop the term marriage in favour of the term civil union (of two or more persons). Most movement activists still speak in the terms of general, specific, main and minor struggles. The movements, which have been most successful are those that have been able to combine the prominent identities of their group like women, black, workers and lesbian into their agenda and strategies. The crucial mind-shift from common hierarchies and concepts is painfully slow and gradual.

Our struggles are intertwined – this is not about building bridges.

After recognition and acceptance of differences and diversity, movement organizations generally struggle to incorporate new issues but wind up choosing to show solidarity and/or network with other movements. It is usually not possible for organizations to incorporate a variety of issues into their strategizing, given their organizational capacities. For example, the Black Women's Movement has built strong ties with the women's and sexuality rights movement in Latin America. They forge alliances between two movements on a particular issue, go to each other's events or celebrate each other's symbolic days like the International Women's Day or Labour Day.

The speakers of the Dialogue between Feminists spent considerable time in differentiating alliance and engagement. The anti-war activist said that her group engages with separatists because of the peace process but would never make alliances with them.

There are groups in the anti-globalization and anti-war struggles, which use the anti-imperialist discourse for their own purposes. The religious right is part of most anti-war campaigns, but feminists do not make alliances with them. Many are opposed to even 'engaging' with them. Do fundamentalists receive legitimacy from sharing a platform with progressive groups and movements? Most

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speakers felt that we have to strategically move in and move out, or else any dialogue with them will break down.

The challenge before us is how to change our political culture and practice. The speakers of the Dialogue between Feminists were introspective and candid enough to say that we first needed to debate the issues of diversity and inclu-

sivity within the women's movement. We seem to be clear on what we do not want than on what we do want, in our vision for the movement. But there is no doubt that we need each other to work out methodologies and politics of alliance by coming to grips with the concepts of interrelations and intersections between movements.

### Notes

1 The names of the activists are:

Women's Movement:	Virginia Vargas, Peru
Dalit/race Movement:	Sunila Abeysekere, Sri Lanka Martin Macwan, India
LGBT Movement:	David Haslam, UK Alejandra Sarda, Argentine Manohar, India
Labour Movement:	Sonny Melancio, Philipinnes Rohit Prajapati, India
Moderators:	Candidol Ibase, Brazil and Mallika Dutt, Breakthrough, USA.

2 The speakers for the second Inter Movement Dialogues in Brazil were:

Trade Union Movement:	Manoel Messias de Melo, CUT, Latin America Solange de Perena Viva, Campesina, Brazil
Race and Ethnic Movements:	Veronica Laurenço, Black Women's Movement, Brazil Ruth Manorama, Dalit Rights movement, India
Sexuality Movements:	Alejandra Sarda, International Gay, Lesbian and Transgendered Movement, Argentina John Fisher, ARC, Canada
Women's Movement:	Virginia Vargas, AFM Latin America Gigi Francisco, DAWN sea The Chairperson was Candido Ibase, Brazil and the moderator was Sunila Abeysekere, Sri Lanka.

3 The report and video cd of the Inter Movement Dialogues in Brazil is available in three languages, English, Spanish and French. Please contact the authors at [aksharacentre@vsnl.com](mailto:aksharacentre@vsnl.com)

4 The speakers and the movements were:

Anti Globalisation Movement – Mabel Ag  
GCAP – Alejandra Scampini (DAWN), Everjoyce Win (Action Aid)  
Anti War and Peace Movement – Sunila Abeysekere, INFORM (Srlanka)  
Anti Fundamentalism Movement – Farida Shaheed (Shirkat Gah, Pakistan),  
Anti Fundamentalism Movement – Lucy Garrido (AFM – Uruguay)  
World Social Forum – International Council – Celita Eccher  
Social Movement Assembly – Diane Matte (World March of women, Canada)  
Labour Movement - Leontine Bljleveld (FNV The Netherlands)  
Feminist Dialogues: -Nandita Gandhi (NNAWGS, India)  
Inter Movement Dialogues – Gina Vargas (AFM, Peru)  
Moderators: Nandita Shah, NAWG India and Carol Barton, WICEJ International.