

An Interactive Space for Feminisms

Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah¹

The Events

Since 2001, when the first World Social Forum [WSF] was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, a growing number of people and movements have contributed to make it a unique international event. It has been described as ‘a socially horizontal space’, 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. It attracted 1,55,000 people to the last Forum, with 2500 seminars and numerous cultural activities.² It has also generated numerous fringe events that take place before or after the World Social Forum like the World Water Forum, World Education Forum, World Parliamentary Forum, etc. Feminist Dialogues is one such event which took place before the WSF in Mumbai, India [2004] and in Porto Alegre, Brazil [2005].

The World Social Forum said, ‘Another World is Possible’. The women replied, ‘Only if it is a gender just world’.

During the second WSF, feminist networks within the International Council [IC] of the WSF noted with some amazement that 43 per cent of participants to the Forum were women but the articulation by the women’s movement did not seem to be reflected in the formulation of themes and axes of the Forum. Networks like the Articulacion Feminista Marcusor (AFM) from Latin America, World March of Women, DAWN and others who were active in the International Council decided to “visiblise the feminist presence”. The establishment of a ‘planet Femea (women’s tent) or Women’s Strategy Meeting was attempted in 2002 and 2003 but did not seem sufficient. Spontaneously, some 50 women met informally after the WSF 2003 to discuss women’s participation. A similar process was going on among Indian feminists who were excited that so many feminists from all over the world would be attending the WSF. They were looking forward to a dialogue between Indian feminists and those from abroad.

Some of these women and the Indian feminist network got together to conceptualise and organise the Feminist Dialogues [FD I].³ It was seen as linked to, but organisationally independent of, the WSF. This deliberate ambivalent link was maintained because the networks were clear on the relevance and necessity of an international event like the Forum, but its strategy was of simultaneous co-operation [by being active within the IC and Forum] and pressure [by organising outside it]. At first, the FD was meant to strengthen the feminist presence within the WSF; later the objective broadened to providing a space for transnational feminist discussions, strategising and alliance building as well as linking up with other social movements in the politics of global resistance.⁴

Feminist Dialogues I

FD I was entitled ‘Building Solidarities’ and was held on January 14 and 15, 2004, in Mumbai, India. Concept papers on the four themes along with other materials were

distributed to participants during registration. Four plenary presentations by panelists highlighted the focal points of the theme papers in order to raise several questions for small group discussions. Towards the evening, a summarised version of the group discussions was presented to all the participants for an open debate. A variety of topics including information were shared by participants during these open discussions, providing an insight into local issues and struggles.

1. **Women's Human Rights:** participants thought that the human rights approach has raised more questions than answers. It has been effectively used to raise awareness and issues of rights in a way that cannot be ignored by the state and society. However, there have been criticisms that the rights approach has become popular mainly because of the UN and donors' agendas. Some of the main problems were the contradictions between individual and community rights; its intersectionality with multiple identities; and the absence of non-state actors. Heated debates were heard around the re-framing of human rights: from where do we begin, and do we need a new political understanding of the state? Finally, human rights is about creating an environment where women can collectively affirm their right to live with dignity.
2. **Reclaiming Women's Bodies.** The struggle for reproductive rights has been fraught with dilemmas as the contradiction between 'choice' and 'rights' has created huge problems for the women's movement. The state is a big player in controlling women's rights through its medical and population policies. Unethical and coercive methods of promoting population control still persist. How do we as feminists view the reproductive rights of adolescents and of people living with HIV/AIDS?
3. **Challenging Sexual Borders and frontiers.** The control of female sexuality, the restriction and regulation of women's sexual choices and the pervasiveness of hetero-normativity are part of patriarchal practice through the state, the legal systems, culture, religion and market forces. The intimate nature of sexual practices and choices makes it a sensitive subject to discuss, but silence aggravated the problem. One of the key questions during the debate was - How can we problematise intersecting relations of power in a way that leads to a broader understanding of issues of sexual politics?
4. **Beyond the Local-Global Divide.** Neo-liberal economic policies have polarised the rich and poor, the powerful and the marginalized. On the one hand it has created opportunities for some, and on the other it has robbed others of hope and employment. Right-wing forces have seen an upward swing and women have joined them in big numbers. Most social movements are facing fragmentation; but they have also provoked some innovative struggles. We can no longer posit the local against the global as we need a vital connection between the two both in theory and in struggle.⁵

Feminist Dialogues II

Participation in the Feminist Dialogues grew from 162 women in Mumbai to 250 in Brazil. This was mainly the result of a hard-hitting evaluation which brought in changes in the FD's content, logistics, participants and funds. FD I was the first attempt of the Co-ordinating Group [CG] to work together, hurriedly put assembled in a short time and with very limited resources. For the second FD, the CG was better prepared to understand individual strengths and time constraints. Communications improved as everyone became familiar with e groups and chats. Moreover, there was a feeling of trust and co-operation among the members. One of the first decisions taken was to appoint a co-ordinator and draw up a global proposal for financial support. These resources were channelised through four organisations to grant scholarships to selected participants, and for improved logistics, especially better translation facilities. In order to make the FD more representative, an open application process was initiated on the Net. A conscious search for participants from West and Central Asia, East Europe and Africa was enfolded into the selection process.

FD II made significant changes in the content and distribution of contents. In order to involve more groups in the content and method of the Dialogues, a 'board', called the Consultative Network Group of 18 was initiated. A preamble outlining the conceptual framework and themes [Globalisation, Militarization and Fundamentalism] for FD II was put out on the Net: 'At this historical and political juncture we confront three major forces that work together just as much as they work separately. Our understanding of the impact of these forces on our bodies, our relations, our lives is still incomplete.... We would like this Feminist Dialogue to interrogate the body, recover its complexities, and examine the ways in which we can regain control over our bodies as a strategic element of our collective agency and our vision of alternatives.'⁶

FD II also modified the earlier format; long presentations on the FD themes were replaced by daily plenary and small group discussions. Twelve women from the CNG agreed to become facilitators for small group discussions. A new input was chiding in interlocutors who would summarise and present the main points of discussions in the small groups for a broader discussion in the plenary. The first day began with the 'launching ritual' or introduction of participants, CG and facilitators and buzz group discussions in which the participants listed the most important themes facing the women's movement. Maxine Molyneux, a feminist scholar from the UK, Gina Vargas from Peru and Vahida Nainar from India set the tone of the FD by underscoring the challenges that neo-liberal economic policies, fundamentalism and militarization pose for the transnational women's movement. All three global trends have intensified social and economic tensions, as well as polarised people.

The second day began with participants dividing themselves into language-based groups to discuss the various sites of resistance, how they interlinked with them; the fragmentation within movements, new actors and strategies required to engage with them and build solidarity with each other. In the plenary the facilitators presented succinct summaries of discussions held in their respective groups.

On the last day, the small group discussions highlighted the necessity of a trans feminist women's movement and on forging alliances with women from other social movements. A group of facilitators presented a brief summary of the discussions. In response to a demand from some participants for a session on the WSF, a plenary was organised, with

some CG members and others presenting their views on the International Council of the WSF, urging feminists to build strategic alliances with movement spaces within the WSF framework and its 11 terrains. The final plenary was on the CG's vision of Feminist Dialogues.

Feminist Dialogues becomes a different and new initiative within the transnational women's movements because in the past decade, most meetings of women's groups have been based on specific interests like AIDS, ICT, human rights, etc, or in conjunction with UN processes. FD by contrast, signals a return to movement activism. This is significant, as women's movements in some countries are on the decline, while in others they face the backlash of globalisation and fundamentalism. By linking women of different nationalities, of varying ages, across different regions and political persuasions, FD tacitly stated that the creation of interactive spaces can become a resource for transnational feminist movements, and can lead to reinventing its basic ideology as well as affirming its belief in diversity.

Reclaiming an 'ism'

Feminist Dialogues has come at a time when, internationally, there are two strong and mass-based movements: the anti-war and anti-globalisation movements. They may have drawn many women in but they have not raised feminist concerns. FD I and II are reclaiming the term 'feminist' by extending its scope to take in the new global context. Today there is some ambiguity around the term, feminism. Some younger women, already in a 'post-patriarchal' phase, reject it as being unnecessary. Women within the movement take it for granted while those outside it in other movements, hardly refer to it. For many of us from India, feminism was a derogatory word, used as an insult in the 1980s.

We broadly defined feminism as '... a consciousness of patriarchal control of women's labour, fertility and sexuality. Its significant features are an emphasis on the personal, as well as a politicisation of the personal.... As an ideology with a worldview, feminism does not in any way reject "general" issues, political parties or mass organisations.'⁷ The vibrant debate between the various schools of radical, liberal, Marxist and socialist feminisms exhausted itself, and soon post-modern feminism joined the fray.

In the absence of an ongoing debate, and with the tide of neo-liberal economics and post-modernism, feminism appears to have returned to its liberal moorings. We see this in the growing trend among women's groups to focus on gender relations, debate gender neutrality and bring in men's voices. Increasing employment among women often provokes the mass media into saying 'yet another male bastion has been overcome'. Young women from the urban middle class feel they are in a post-liberation phase, as they glibly refer to the giant strides taken in women's education, employment and mobility. An acute awareness of 'identity' has given rise to the curious incongruity of the modern and the traditional, as expressed in westernised forms of dressing, insistence on vocations, sexual liberation, combined with the desire for religious/ traditional practices and arranged marriages. Feminism for these women is the freedom to do what they want.

For us, feminism goes beyond the popular liberal understanding of equality between men and women. By qualifying the Dialogues as Feminist, we believe that the seven organising networks seek to unwrap the ideology from its taken-for-granted oblivion, and reiterate what feminism and feminist practice mean to us in our present context. Feminism as an ideology attempts to understand the oppression and agency of women within a patriarchal structure and in the present neo-liberal economic, social and political systems. A feminism that is against fundamentalism, global capitalism and imperialism. A feminism which allies itself with the marginalized, dalit and indigenous people. A feminism, which unfolds its practice every day in our lives and continues the quest for collective and democratic functioning.

The CG is a non-hierarchical network linking its partners from Asia, Africa and the US with the help of e mail, Net chats and preparatory meetings. By using a collective form of functioning, the Dialogues once again reaffirm that there are other means, based on feminist values, which can be used to connect. No doubt the CG has had its share of problems, but two FDs in a row shows that there are alternatives to hierarchies and formal modes of organisation.

Differing Experiences

The sharing of personal experiences helps women articulate, seek support and formulate strategies for change. These experiences in different forms like oral testimonies, narratives and interviews have been the basis of feminist theorising and of the politicisation of issues. In the 1970s and '80s, there was a spate of rich literature featuring the voices of marginalized women. Underlining the women's approach was the assumption that women share a commonality of unequal and exploitative gender relations in society. In spite of variations, women in most societies have restrictions imposed on their mobility and sexuality, fear violence, face some form of discrimination and do unpaid domestic labour, or find themselves in the informal sector of employment. These common conditions were generalised to not only cover all women but also to form the basis of 'a universal sisterhood'. A scathing critique of this came from Black and Third World women, who argued that women are not a homogenous group, sharing the same experiences and goals. Different locations – of region, religion, culture, age, sexual preference, among others—play a significant part in women's experiences, which are further processed by the nature of society, state, economic location, and so on.

The thesis of universal sisterhood has become part of feminist history as the acceptance of diversity and plurality among different women was foregrounded. The FD also placed an emphasis on diversity among its participants, raising resources for different women to attend, and ensuring a mix of age, race, region, ethnicity, sexual minorities and political views. Were we not creating a 'Babel of experiences'? What was the relationship of experiences to politics?

We need to hear the voices of those women who have disappeared, have had their homes demolished, have been sexually oppressed by armed forces; or those who have been silenced due to their sexual preferences, or been pushed into the exploitative informal

sector. By accepting diversity, we open up the space for other voices to emerge. We demonstrate a respect for their personal histories and realities instead of homogenising them in the whirr of a theoretical blender. It is only when we reflect on and build bridges between our different specificities that we can form networks or the basis of our analysis. The Feminist Dialogues attempted to actualise this by giving almost equal space to small group discussions and to plenaries which pulled the theoretical threads together.

We believe it is unnecessary to privilege either the specific or the universal, rather we aim to emphasise the link between the two. Instead of universalising our experiences, we need to universalise our visions and goals as women's movements.

A dialogue for the future

FD I led to FD II, and there is now a third one in the pipeline. Both have been successful in their own ways, with improved logistics, increasing participation, vibrant discussions and good comments and criticism. No one could miss the kaleidoscope of different languages, colourful dress, and excitement of new issues and political analysis! For many of us, it was a return to the animated discussions, sharing of experiences and strategies of the early phase of the women's movement. For newer members, it meant rich discussions, insights and reflection; the sense of solidarity was almost palpable. In their own ways, both the organisers and the participants made the FDs a success. The majority of those who evaluated them, suggested regional FDs. There is no doubt that the FD is fulfilling a latent need among activists caught in the turmoil or isolation of their local movements; but before we embark on yet another FD, we need to take a closer look at our own event.

We celebrated a diversity of views and gave them ample space within the small group discussions and at the plenary. A thousand flowers bloomed. These scattered views needed to be combined and formulated into a tentative common political framework/frameworks for further debate. This would have been possible had the experiment with interlocutors been successful. At the end of two days, however, a few of us went away feeling that we had glimpsed, but not yet found, another way of thinking about our local issues and strategies. We had asked questions, but not come up with new answers; we had shared experiences and strategies, but not developed a different paradigm for feminist understanding on globalisation, fundamentalism and conflict.

FD II had one hastily put together plenary which described the WSF and the functioning of the International Council, only because of requests from participants. What was absent was a discussion on our strategy in relation to the WSF and the spaces that the new format had created for a feminist intervention. We missed out on the opportunity to invite women from other movements, forge links and discuss joint strategies.

The FD opened up a space and successfully drew in diverse women and views; but it was not a totally open space or a space without boundaries. Women could participate only after they had been selected. The organisers had a broad feminist and political perspective within which the FD operated, the assumption being that too much divergence or contradictory political convictions would have led to sharp conflicts, at

the cost of in-depth discussions. The logical question then would be: how in-depth were the discussions and how were they consolidated in order to arrive at a different politics, more in tune with our present context? For example, most women would have no problem calling themselves feminist. Their discussions were full of examples from local situations on the impact of globalisation, fundamentalism and conflict. This could, during the plenary, have led to a layered understanding of feminism enveloping these concerns and our campaigns. Secondly, using the prism of 'the body' to look at our situations of globalisation, militarisation and fundamentalism was resorted to only by a few participants and facilitators.

Unlike the WSF, the CG has not organised the FD as a continuous process, it has moved from one FD to another. Yes, it did conduct the mandatory evaluations and planning processes, but perhaps it needs to reinvent itself as a process if it wishes to continue year after year. On the one hand, the dialogues within the last two FDs need to be continued on the Internet, interwoven with theoretical inputs and campaigns. On the other, the organisers and the consultative group must bring in constructive criticism on the planning, structure, content and implementation in the form of papers for discussion at preparatory meetings.

Lastly, a word on networks. Feminist groups have experimented with flat or collective functioning as it challenges hierarchies and formalised functioning, in the belief that this will facilitate an equitable and greater participation of women. The FD saw both the advantages and disadvantages of this process. There was a definite sense of collective ownership, trust and commitment. The CG had its own e-mail group, mails were shared and decisions debated and taken during chat sessions. A co-ordinator was appointed to take charge and finalise reports. But one of the main problems was the vague delineation of the tasks and roles of the co-ordinator and other members, and between the two co-ordinators. Often we were not sure which one of us was responsible for a particular task. Secondly, all CG members were involved in their own groups and programmes and also with the FD; each one opted for tasks which they could manage, given their time constraints and travel. The division was lopsided with some doing more than the others and some tasks remaining undone. This took a toll on all of us and the CG was burdened with tension and overwork.

In between Dialogues, there was a disheartening lull in energy, which revived only for the next preparatory meeting. Without jettisoning the values of collectivism, we need to devise ways of responsible and accountable co-operation through a democratic process of having a rotating convenorship. A formal declaration of commitment of time and resources needs to be made. This formality is not intended to exclude members, but to make for better planning and flexibility so members can opt to be in or out. The issue of funding has always been tricky. Funders' priorities and conditionalities permeate our objectives and programmes. The CG avoided this by not relying on any one donor, but several funders entailed that much more administrative work for all the groups. For the future, the CG will have to think of a rotating secretariat within one of their network members' organisations or dispense with centralised fund-raising. We believe that local organising groups should raise and be responsible for their own funds. This would then leave the CG free to design a new FD, change its content, and improve its implementation.

ENDNOTES

¹ Views expressed in the article are of the two authors and do not reflect those of the Coordinating Group. We do belong to the CG as part of the NNAWG. We can be reached at gandhinandita@yahoo.com or shahnandita@rediffmail.com

² Refer to website of World Social Forum

³ Articulacion Feminista Marcusor, Latin America; Development Alternatives for Women in a New era, Asia Pacific; African Women's Development and Communication Network, FEMNET: Africa; INFORM, Sri Lanka; ISIS International; National Network of Autonomous Women's Groups, India; and Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice

⁴ The full text of the objectives: In having the meeting before the WSF we hope to achieve a two-way political exchange: firstly, we hope to effectively intervene in the broader WSF process as feminists organizing for change, and to establish strategic and politically relevant links with other social movements. As a site of resistance, the WSF is one of the most dynamic spaces available to us as feminist activists and it is important to participate in it while at the same time retaining our autonomy within the FD. We also are hopeful that the idea of the FD can be used to encourage various regional level meetings or to participate in the different forums we are engaged in as part of our ongoing work of linking up with other movements. Through the FD we do not seek to come up with unified positions or perspectives. While a certain minimum consensus is necessary to maintain the cohesion of the meeting, we think that the value of meetings such as the FD lie in bringing forth debates and differences that provoke us to reflect, reassess and recast our analyses and strategies, collectively as well as individually. The FD can be a platform that strengthens our diversities as well as our common politics.

⁵ Excerpted from Report of Feminist Dialogues, Mumbai

⁶ The full text of the Preamble is available on the website:

<http://feministdialogues.isiswomen.org>

⁷ Refer to *Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India*, by Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, Kali for Women, New Delhi 1992.