

# The Global Women's Rights Movement

*Power Politics around the United Nations  
and the World Social Forum*

*Wendy Harcourt*

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## Acronyms

<b>APDC</b>	Asia Pacific Development Centre
<b>AWID</b>	Association for Women's Rights in Development
<b>CEE</b>	Commonwealth of Independent States
<b>CIS</b>	Central and Eastern Europe
<b>CSW</b>	United Nations Commission on the Status of Women
<b>DAWN</b>	Development Alternatives with Women in a New Era
<b>FINNRAGE</b>	Feminist Network of International Resistance to the new Reproductive Technologies and Genetic Engineering
<b>G8</b>	Group of 8 industrialized countries
<b>GCAP</b>	Global Call for Action against Poverty
<b>MDG</b>	Millennium Development Goal
<b>RAINBO</b>	Research Action and Information Network for the Bodily Integrity of Women
<b>SID</b>	Society for International Development
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNCED</b>	United National Conference on Environment and Development
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNDPI</b>	United Nations Department of Public Information
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>WEDO</b>	Women's Environment and Development Organization
<b>WID</b>	Women in Development
<b>WIDE</b>	Women in Development Europe
<b>WICEJ</b>	Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice
<b>WSF</b>	World Social Forum
<b>WTO</b>	World Trade Organization

## Summary/Résumé/Resumen

### **Summary**

This paper examines the discourse, inputs and reorganization of strategies that emanated from the lobbying of women's rights movements vis-à-vis global agencies like the United Nations (UN), as well as the World Social Forum. Harcourt sets out some key strategic questions for consideration: How much have women's movements achieved by working in collaboration with the UN? Is there a recognizable global women's rights movement as it is perceived on the UN stage? Is there such an entity as a global women's movement, or is it just a skilfully played mirage?

The author seeks to answer these questions based on her experience as a feminist researcher and activist involved in women's rights issues, as well as through reference to the literature and ongoing debates. The essay is a contribution to these heated debates: about the role of global agencies; their effects on the autonomy, legitimacy and representativeness of social movements; and their local impacts and actual benefits for women around the globe.

Wendy Harcourt is Editor of *Development*, the flagship journal of the Society for International Development (SID), Rome, Italy.

### **Résumé**

L'auteure s'intéresse ici aux mouvements pour les droits de la femme, à leur discours, à ce qu'ils ont apporté et à la réorientation des stratégies dont témoigne leur action auprès d'institutions mondiales comme l'ONU et le Forum social mondial. Wendy Harcourt pose des questions stratégiques clés qu'elle soumet à notre réflexion: Qu'est-ce qu'ont gagné les mouvements féminins à travailler en collaboration avec l'ONU? Y a-t-il un mouvement mondial pour les droits de la femme reconnaissable perçu comme tel dans l'enceinte de l'ONU? Existe-t-il vraiment un mouvement mondial des femmes ou est-ce simplement un mirage dont on joue avec adresse?

L'auteure cherche à répondre à ces questions en se fondant sur son expérience de chercheuse et de militante féministe engagée sur les questions des droits de la femme, ainsi que sur la littérature et les débats en cours. Son essai est une contribution à ces débats passionnés sur le rôle des institutions mondiales, leurs effets sur l'autonomie, la légitimité et la représentativité des mouvements sociaux, leur impact au niveau local et les avantages réels qu'en tirent les femmes à travers le monde.

Wendy Harcourt est la rédactrice de *Development*, la revue phare de la Society for International Development (SID), Rome, Italie.

### **Resumen**

En este documento se analiza el discurso, los aportes y la reorganización de las estrategias resultantes del cabildeo que han realizado los movimientos de derechos de la mujer ante organismos internacionales como las Naciones Unidas, así como ante el Foro Social Mundial. Harcourt formula una serie de preguntas estratégicas clave, a saber: ¿Cuáles han sido los logros de los movimientos de mujeres al trabajar en colaboración con las Naciones Unidas? ¿En el escenario de las Naciones Unidas se percibe y reconoce un movimiento mundial de derechos de la mujer? ¿Existe una entidad que pudiéramos llamar movimiento mundial de mujeres, o se trata de apenas un espejismo manejado con destreza?

La autora busca responder a estos interrogantes a partir de su experiencia como investigadora de temas feministas y activista en el campo de los derechos de la mujer, así como mediante

referencias a la bibliografía pertinente y los debates actuales sobre estos temas. Este ensayo es una contribución a los candentes debates en curso sobre el papel de los organismos internacionales, sus efectos sobre la autonomía, legitimidad y representatividad de los movimientos sociales y sus repercusiones a nivel local y beneficios reales para las mujeres en todas partes del mundo.

Wendy Harcourt es Directora de *Development*, el periódico insignia de la Sociedad para el Desarrollo Internacional, Roma, Italia.

## Introduction

In recent years, the global women's rights movement has become a visible player in civil society and United Nations (UN) negotiations. Particularly around the big UN conferences of the 1990s, the lobbying of women's rights networks has established issues such as women's empowerment, gender mainstreaming and women's human rights as a key feature of UN intergovernmental negotiations and agreements. As Tinker states:

UN Conferences were critical in raising women's issues globally and promoting networking. ... The four world women's conferences and the many events that surrounded them legitimated women's agendas and united women across ideological and national boundaries (Fraser and Tinker 2004:xxvii).

In recent literature, there has been a celebration of the results of this engagement. Joanna Kerr, executive director of the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), enthusiastically remarks that

feminists a hundred years ago could never have dreamed of the successes so many of us enjoy today. Just imagine how feminists in the twenty-second century will celebrate our achievements (Kerr et al. 2004:37).

At the same time, even those very close to the process are questioning the energy that women give to the UN processes. Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, a global women's rights leader from the Open Society Institute questions

whether or not the United Nations and its mechanisms and instruments should still be our focus...the international women's movement will have to deal with the pros and cons of retreating from the UN altogether...a critical question given that for the last thirty years the UN has contributed greatly to building the women's movement (Kerr et al. 2004:187-188).

The question I would like to explore in this essay is to what extent both this questioning and celebration is valid. I am interested in the growing unease among women working around the UN processes and the shift toward global justice movements as the pivots of the global women's movement's attention. Questions are now being raised about how much women have achieved outside the world of the United Nations and its statements, documents and complex negotiation processes. In addition, questions are being raised about whether the women working at the global level are visible beyond the halls of the United Nations as a genuine movement. Has there been a recognizable success of their work back home, among the communities to which they so often refer? Is there an identifiable global women's rights movement in other political arenas as it is perceived on the UN stage? Are women's rights on the agendas of other social movements? Who are the defining players of this global women's rights movement? What is their legitimacy both within and beyond the women's rights movement at national and regional levels? And what is their relationship to the World Social Forum (WSF)? Is there such an entity as a global women's rights movement, or is it just useful to some women as a political mirage?

As a feminist researcher and activist involved in women's rights issues since the mid-1980s,<sup>1</sup> I explore these questions by looking at the last 15 years of global political work by women in the North and South who have banded together as a global women's rights movement in response to the UN processes. The essay is a frank insider's view, based on my own reflections,

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<sup>1</sup> I have been working in international development issues since 1988 when I joined the Society for International Development (SID) as coordinator of the Society for International Development-Women in Development (SID-WID). I have been active in various networks and attended many of the UN conferences as a non-governmental organization (NGO) delegate representing SID and Women in Development Europe (WIDE). I am currently chair of WIDE.

conversations, writings and readings that are part of my work for women's rights in the global arena.<sup>2</sup>

My focus is on what I see as the specific contribution of the global women's rights, as a self-defined movement – an issue I take up throughout the essay – to development policy and social movements. I look in some detail at the cluster of issues, which I label body politics, that are at the heart of what distinguishes women's rights movements from other rights movements. Essentially, this refers to struggles to end gender violence, ensure sexual choice and promote reproductive rights and women's health. It is difficult to prise this set of struggles from other political and economic concerns that impact on women, so the essay also looks at how these issues interact and engage with other "gender equality" battles.<sup>3</sup>

As the global social justice movement is building up a new momentum that is shifting the focus of civil society away from the United Nations as the primary arena for global expression, it is important to consider the history of the global women's rights movement around the United Nations and also its interactions within global social justice movements. By analysing the way the global women's rights movement has been operating, the essay aims both to contribute to the current documentation of women's rights movements, teasing out the various processes, tensions and contradictions that have defined it histories, and also to foster connections with other global social movements.<sup>4</sup>

## Definitions

The knowledge and terminology used in this essay is both specialized and contested, and indeed this contestation is part of the history of the global women's rights movement. To begin with, the term global women's rights movement is itself not a neatly defined identity. As queried above, is there a global women's rights movement as such? And if so, who belongs to the global women's rights movement? These are certainly contested questions and the answers vary.

Even if Antrobus confidently titled her book *The Global Women's Movement*, in the introduction she states that the term is problematic and clarifies this by adding that it is a movement

formed out of many movements shaped in local struggles and brought together in the context of global opportunities and challenges...as women discover commonalities and come to a better understanding of how the social relations of gender are implicated in the systemic crises (Antrobus 2004:2).

In her edited collection of local feminisms, Basu talks about women's movements from a global perspective, clearly uncomfortable with the concept of a global women's movement even if she states that "few social movements have flourished in as many parts of the world as women's movements have" (1995:1). She immediately qualifies this with the comment

Yet they differ radically...women activists often diverge among themselves and with each other on what feminism is...how should we interpret a term such as *global feminism*? (Basu 1995:1).

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<sup>2</sup> Much of the evidence used in this essay comes from my own personal experience and what is called "grey literature", statements and newsletters of NGOs as well as material placed on organizations' or institutions' Web sites.

<sup>3</sup> Over the last few years there has been considerable strategic debate about whether to push for women's rights as part of a political strategy to bring women into development or whether to focus on gender and power relations and to aim for gender equality or gender justice (Barton 2005; Antrobus 2004) and, therefore, gender mainstream development. The differences partly reflect a generational shift, but also a broadening of the women's issue from economic rights; see Boserup's (1970) landmark book, which includes a far more holistic and political agenda, together with gender perspectives on trade and financing institutions, race, environment and livelihoods. Both Fraser and Tinker (2004) and Antrobus (2004) give interesting accounts of these shifts in development thinking.

<sup>4</sup> These questions are also tackled in three recent anthologies and histories of the global women's movement; see Antrobus (2004), Kerr et al. (2004) and Riccutelli et al. (2004).



She explores the concept that it could be a common movement “that is spread across many regions” (Basu 1995:1).

It is possible to identify many types of global women's movements: (i) radical women's organizations that operate as much as they can as women-only groups outside “patriarchal” institutions and do not accept outside funding;<sup>5</sup> (ii) professional women's organizations; and (iii) religious and charity organizations.<sup>6</sup> I am looking specifically at the women's rights organizations that have come together at the global level from a progressive perspective. They address the UN and transnational processes as non-state organizations, some registered as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but most as global networks that bring together either organizations or individuals committed to women's rights.

Petchesky, in her discussion on women's organizations and leadership, describes them as “polyversal feminists” active in organizations such as

DAWN, Articulacion Feminista Mercosur and WEDO who bring feminist leadership to the formation of a broad multidimensional global civil society. These organizations work both inside venues of UN Conferences...and within alternative gatherings for “another world” in the World Social Forums (2003:273).<sup>7</sup>

They are a mix of liberal, social and radical feminism<sup>8</sup> and even if founded on progressive political lines, they do not directly engage as women's rights groups in mainstream politics. They are a fluid group, with a shifting leadership depending on energies and issues, and one that consciously seeks to not be dominated by any one set of people and certainly not by women identified as Western mainstream.

There are no card-carrying members, though most of the networks have a democratically elected board or system in place that ensures broad representation of the membership in decision-making positions. However, if you sift through the communications, debates and publications, there are core institutions physically situated near New York and the United Nations, which are pivotal because of their proximity and access to the United Nations. Nevertheless, there are also global South women's movements that play an important role, and then there are global networks that attend UN meetings, although with the intention to represent more than the centre (see below). There are regional and national women's institutions that link to these core groups in different processes around the United Nations, and lately in the WSF and Global Call for Action against Poverty (GCAP). Essentially, it is the knowledge of processes that is determining leadership, proximity and strategic placement in the structures (Fraser and Tinker 2004). Over the years, ways of working that are fluid and reliant on sharing histories and knowledge have evolved that stress the need to work in open and exclusive ways with an attempt to reflect diversity from different regions, and recognize that power and knowledge has to be shared. There is clearly peer recognition, and continual—and healthy—power challenges. Although the claim is that there is always space for individuals

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<sup>5</sup> Some examples are Women in Black, Feminist Network of International Resistance to the new Reproductive Technologies and Genetic Engineering (FINNRAGE) and Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, among many more.

<sup>6</sup> There are a huge number of professional women's organizations, ranging from the Quaker women's peace movement, the Young Women's Christian Association and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, to farmers' wives associations, women lawyers and women's wings of the Rotary Club. In the last few years, Right-wing women's charity groups, often with funding from the US government, have become more and more prominent in intergovernmental discussions.

<sup>7</sup> See *Window on the World* (2002) for a short description and Web sites of around 30 organizations and networks including AWID, Centre for Women's Global Leadership, Development Alternatives with Women in a New Era (DAWN), International Women's Health Coalition, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, MADRE, Research Action and Information Network for the Bodily Integrity of Women (RAINBO), AMANITARE (coordinated by RAINBO), Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights, WomenAction, Isis International, Network of East-West Women and WIDE.

<sup>8</sup> These divisions were popular in Western women's movements in the 1970s and 1980s when liberal feminists looked at individual rights and lobbied for women to gain political positions in government and bureaucracies, social feminists lobbied for fair employment along class issues taking up a defiant stance against the state, and radical feminists took a separatist line focused on sexuality and ecological issues (McDowell and Pringle 1992). As Antrobus (2004) states, in the global arena these divisions were broken down largely by challenges from the global South that presented a much more holistic approach.

with insight and knowledge at the centre, the question of how to move people from the margins to the centre is complex and will be explored later in the essay.

This essay focuses in particular on body politics as one of the key sets of connecting issues between women that come from very diverse terrains. The terms that can be clustered within the term “body politics” are: gender violence, sexuality, reproductive rights and health. All of these terms are also contested and have shifted over time depending on cultural and political positionings. The shifts in meaning can be traced to the core UN conference documents<sup>9</sup> and the grey literature when there were concerted efforts to forge a consensus to enable paradigm shifts in development, population and health discourses. Several books have documented this shift<sup>10</sup> as well as the journal that I edit, *Development*.<sup>11</sup> They remain open concepts depending on how they are being used, and often can be redefined depending on strategic need, but essentially they are about women’s rights to bodily integrity, the freedom to choose sexual expression, children, marriage, the struggle to end violence against women and the need for holistic approaches to women’s health and well-being throughout their life stages.

## Theoretical Understanding of Body Politics

The conceptual origins of the term “body politics” comes from different writings by European and American along with African, Asian and Latin American theorists that have been woven into the development discourse. The term builds on the history of feminist writing and activism beginning in the 1950s with the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir’s foundational *The Second Sex*. The second wave of feminism in the 1960s explored and challenged the sense of the female body as “the other”. It probed into what some provocatively call “fleshly politics” (Underhill-Sem 2002) by taking the female body as an entry point for political engagement over a range of issues such as fighting for abortion rights, “reclaim the night” marches, protesting the use of rape as a weapon of war and protesting against beauty pageants. The use of the term deliberately moves away from the liberal notion of feminism based on women and men as “different but equal” to a more complex concept of gender differences that is marked out in cultural, social, economic and political positionings of the physical body. During this period, women’s movements around the world took up the issues of sexual rights, health and violence against women with different histories and struggles.

In 2000 and 2001, I organized a series of regional meetings for the Society for International Development (SID) together with local women’s research institutions that looked at these histories, and it is important to note the different colonial inheritances as well as cultural positionings of different groups of women.<sup>12</sup> For example, the Asia Pacific Islanders and Australian indigenous women experience domestic violence as part of colonial as well as familial patriarchal struggles, but their issues have tended to be ignored by the mainstream white women’s movement, which has focused on welfare state rights. Among poor Latino, indigenous and black women in the United States (US), the experience of domestic violence has many different factors contributing to it that are overlooked in mainstream white discussions, including the Take Back the Night movement and date rape as a feature of violence against women. In India and other areas of South Asia, rights of women to have access to abortion are clouded by continuing neo-Malthusian population control programmes among the poor and the high level of female foeticide that has emerged as part of the so-called choice. Latin America has taken a very progressive stand on sexual choice, but continues to fight Catholic Church opposition to abortion and contraception. In sub-Saharan Africa, the overall level of violence in

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<sup>9</sup> See Tinker (2004) for a brief description of the key conferences and Antrobus (2004) for a much more detailed description from a global South perspective; documents are available at [www.un.org](http://www.un.org).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Kerr et al. (2004); Antrobus (2004); and Petchesky (2002).

<sup>11</sup> [www.sidint.org/development](http://www.sidint.org/development).

<sup>12</sup> The outcome of these meetings is available in individual reports at [www.sidint.org](http://www.sidint.org); some of the most relevant papers were published in *Development: Globalization, Reproduction and Health*, Vol. 46, No. 2, June 2003.

some countries, such as Nigeria, makes gender violence one aspect of the conflict due to a multitude of social, political and economic injustices conditioned by colonial and post-colonial rule. The issue of trafficking of women divides women's rights groups in Europe with extremely different approaches to sex work.

The global development discourse built on these diverse feminist struggles around body politics and constructed through the UN arena a set of practices known as women in development, gender and development, and women's empowerment. Finally, it also helped define what I identify as a global women's rights movement. My analysis of this construction of body politics in the UN discourse borrows from a Foucauldian concept of biopolitics.<sup>13</sup>

Biopolitics understands power as not only imposed vertically by oppressive hierarchical forces, but also horizontally produced and embedded in language and practice. Biopolitics is about the politics of governing or the administration of life. Foucauldian concepts of biopolitics look at how the body is measured, analysed and made subject to an array of strategies that produce both individual and social subjects. From this viewpoint, the body is not understood as a static entity locked into culturally defined biological rhythms, but as a fluid site of power and political contestation. In this reading of biopolitics, development discourse intersecting with other powerful discourses such as the medical profession and family planning agencies produced a particular set of meanings of women's body, health and identity in its policies, programmes and interventions in the fields of women in development, and gender and development. In body politics, the cultural, social and economic realities are played out around the body in medical and development discourses as well as by women's organizations own language and practice of resisting constricting, often violent, codes of conduct over their bodily existence.

In this essay, I look in depth at this play of biopolitics in relation to the administration of women's bodies in the UN processes and the practices, tensions and contestations that make up body politics as it was introduced by women's rights movement into UN discourse and practice.

The related Foucauldian concept of biopower refers to the microphysics of relational understandings of power. Foucault sees power as immanent to everyday relationships, including economic exchanges, knowledge relationships and sexual relationships. Microlevel practices of power are taken up in global or macrostrategies of domination not through centralized power, but through a complex series of infinitesimal mechanisms. These mechanisms of power continually change, linking the microlevel and macrolevel of power. Foucault shows that modern administration and government are exercised through an ensemble of institutions, procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations and tactics. They compose a complex system employing a variety of modes to achieve a particular end—for example, the oppression of women. In understanding how biopower operates, we can dissect the multiplicity and interconnection of microstrategies and macrostrategies of power in the different practices around the United Nations. In so doing, we can examine how women as “dominated” subjects are implicated in discourse and practices that label them as inferior.<sup>14</sup>

## The Historical Setting

As stated above, this essay focuses on body politics where the United Nations has been the key site of reference. In particular, I am looking at the tensions and unease at the sites where the global women's organizations interact officially with the UN arena—in the process of what

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<sup>13</sup> Foucault 1976; Harcourt 1986; Charckiewicz 2004.

<sup>14</sup> See Macleod and Durrheim (2002) for a discussion on Foucault and feminism and microlevel and macrolevel of power.

some have called the NGO-izing of women's issues<sup>15</sup>—and in recent years operate in the global social justice movements.

I divide the discussion of those tensions schematically into three historical phases:

1. The first period is the late 1980s to the early 1990s, a time when I and others from different movements became engaged in more global processes through the UN conference processes. During this period, a holistic discourse emerged that aimed to tackle the overlaps in women's lives. At least as I experienced it, there was an attempt to bring together women's rights, development and environmental groups in discussions on development, population, women and environment leading up to the 1992 United National Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro. This period brought women researchers, bureaucrats and activists working in various technical fields such as environment, population, gender and health into the sustainable development debate.<sup>16</sup> It was the moment when the term sustainable development emerged and the term development was expanded to mean more than economic growth. The greening of economics opened up the space for the feminizing of economics, development and rights issues.<sup>17</sup>
2. The second period from 1992 to 1999 takes place around the UN conferences. This period saw a continual challenge of narrow economic debates on development and a shift to a much broader definition of social justice concerns that challenged, in the end, sustainable development itself. As the gender and development agenda was debated, the focus on women's rights and issues of health, violence, bodily integrity, sexual and reproductive rights, and health took over more straightforward economic concerns. This was a complex and fraught period marked by the hope that government promises and policy could be "put into practice on the ground". It saw the emergence of gender mainstreaming, gender budgets, civil society as a third actor and a sophisticated discourse around body politics and a strong presence of women among the NGOs that were engaged in the UN debates. As Posadskaya-Vanderbeck comments:

sophisticated and savvy women's movements who are able to maintain accountability efforts at the UN will contribute to overcoming the ever-expanding challenges and barriers to gender equality presented by poverty, fundamentalisms and militarization (Kerr et al. 2004:189).

3. The third period dates from 1999, beginning with Seattle and other mass demonstrations against the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and globalization. This period was marked by a collapse of hope in the UN agenda, and the professionalism of the women's movement in the UN processes was seriously questioned, particularly as the neoconservative neoliberal agendas began unashamedly to dominate. During this period, a much more critical link was made to social and economic justice movements, and heated debates around economic injustice and women's movements began to address issues of trade, debt, globalization and the role of the World Bank and international financial institutions much more closely. As Bracke comments:

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<sup>15</sup> See Alvarez's chapter on "Advocating feminism" in Riccutelli et al. (2004), in particular page 127. Alvarez is currently writing a book on this issue to be published in 2006.

<sup>16</sup> The term sustainable development has had many definitions, some linked more closely to ecological concerns, others to a long-term vision rather than short-term gains. The UNCED definition became the reference point from which many groups argued their positions, including business, development policy makers, demographers and women's groups. However, these alliances around sustainable development had a short-lived period as the term became more and more extended and defined until it became synonymous with development itself. In my work and writing at the Society for International Development, I published several journal issues on sustainable development and the *Feminist Perspectives on Sustainable Development* (1994). These publications show how the transformatory potential of sustainable development quickly dissipated.

<sup>17</sup> See Harcourt (1994), an edited collection of feminists on the sustainable development debate. The claim I make in the introduction is that feminists are asking different questions than mainstream economists or ecologists, and the contributors to the book set out a wide range of diverse issues that feminists were tackling around environment, peace and development alternatives.

Our feminist perspectives and struggles need to be informed by the contradictions within and between the lives of women living in late global capitalism (Kerr et al. 2004).

The WSF emerged as a potential site to develop these debates and for women to bring body politics to economic justice concerns, and for a strong critique of neoliberalism and the various forms of fundamentalisms.

## Phase One: Engagement with Sustainable Development

My starting point is two events, which I argue marked the debut or visibility of the global women's rights movement in the sustainable development debate. These events are: (i) the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet in Miami, Florida, in late 1991; and (ii) the series of meetings hosted in the Planeta Femea (The Women's Tent) at the Global Forum, the non-governmental forum of the Earth Summit of UNCED in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in mid-1992.<sup>18</sup> They were historic moments in terms of global progressive women's movements consolidating their collective agendas and preparing to respond collectively to the official development discourse.<sup>19</sup>

Through the UN conferences and the regional processes of preparation, many thousands of women and men working in civil society organizations entered the international agenda-setting arenas. They acted as a bridge between local needs and complex global policy setting; the slogan of the day was "act local, think global". At the Miami and Rio de Janeiro meetings, women strategized on how to enter the global policy debate in order to bring diverse women's needs to international policy agreements, and to help translate them into action at home.

The engagement with the UN and global development agenda was a wary one. The Miami and Rio de Janeiro women's events were marked by strong resistance that was seen as supporting the global development agenda. The discussions were critical of the mainstream development model that treated women, the environment and population as technical subjects within the overarching goal of improving economic growth. Both events outlined alternatives to the mainstream development. These alternatives were defined as holistic and celebrated women's different and unique relationship to the environment. They also tried to make visible women's productive and reproductive roles in development. The language was defiant, as they called on women to come together and change gender-biased, monocultural, militaristic and economic discourse focused on markets and Western science. They decried elitist technical solutions to poverty, injustice and environmental degradation<sup>20</sup> (WEDO 1992; APDC 1992).

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<sup>18</sup> The World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet was held on 8–12 November 1991, convened by the Women's International Policy Action Committee with 54 women from 31 countries and organized by the Women's Environment and Development Organization. The five-day congress drew 1,500 women from 83 countries. It produced the Women's Action Agenda 21 and was seen as a major preparation for the Earth Summit. Planeta Femea was organized by the local Brazilian committee, together with WEDO and DAWN. The Women's Declaration was issued on 10 June at the conclusion of the 92 Global Forum of the Earth Summit. It built on the Women's Action Agenda and was closely linked to Chapter 24 on women under the section Strengthening the Role of Major Groups, in Agenda 21, which was the final text of agreements negotiated by governments at the Earth Summit (UNDP 1992).

<sup>19</sup> The United Nations organized a series of heads of states conferences and summits throughout the 1990s. A description of the series of meetings is available on the United Nations Web site at [www.un.org](http://www.un.org). In this chapter, I refer mainly to those meetings where women's NGOs and activists in civil society were actively engaged in caucusing and organizing to bring a gender perspective to the proceedings, beginning with the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the Vienna Human Rights Conference in 1994, the Cairo United Nations Conference on Population and Development in 1994, the Copenhagen World Summit on Social Development in 1995 and the Beijing Fourth Conference on Women in September 1995. Caucuses were organized in regional meetings as well as global meetings and continued in the five yearly reviews (WEDO 1992).

<sup>20</sup> The Women's Agenda reported in the Asia Pacific Development Centre (APDC) that "Planeta Femea...was a success for all it set out to do and more...Meetings, debates, panel discussions, smaller workshop groups brought over 1200 women daily for a week and a half to consolidate their perspectives on environment and development issues and to provide a platform for women (and men) to voice grievances and frustrations, share experiences and strengths and provide support, advice and critique to one another...there is now going to be a new focus on 'sustainable development' and NGOs, especially women's NGOs should use this as an opportunity to define it as an alternative to the dominant model" (1992:6–9).

What I am interested in here is not so much the truth of the oppositional ideas to development, but the organizational practices through which the global progressive women's movement emerged with its identity. In terms of understanding the play of biopower and how the different tensions between progressive and mainstream development were tackled, it is interesting to see how the legitimacy of these ideas coming out of these meetings was established and the types of political processes women created in order to engage with larger scale UN and other institutional political and economic processes.

Though the stated goal was to produce texts to infiltrate and change the official Rio de Janeiro process, women designed actions that were decidedly different from UN official practice. The opening ceremony in Miami was led by indigenous women of the land where the Hyatt Conference centre had been built. There was a song of welcome to the audience of a thousand or more women from around the world. Leading women from each region<sup>21</sup> gave moving testimonies on the damage wreaked by development on their land, culture, peoples' bodies and the balance of nature. The women judges—judges by profession from Australia, Guyana, India, Kenya and Sweden—presented their findings followed by a series of caucus statements of women from each world region, including women of colour, indigenous women and women from the South. The reports were put together by a team of women and circulated to ensure consensus, read at the final ceremony and assembled in a report ready to be delivered to the media, governments, the Earth Summit, women's and social movements as "a compilation of the work, ideas and values of 1,500 women" and as a "challenge to women and men to work together to create a safe and sustainable future" (WEDO 1992:16).

In this process, the power of women's knowledge as well as the differences between women were acknowledged and even celebrated at the same time that consensus was built through these practices. This is not to say that there were no tensions, but as one of the participants I can testify that there was a strong sense of excitement that there could be a collective voice and strategy, despite the different histories and values.

Anita Anand, then head of the Women's Feature Service in New Delhi, was confident in 1992

that the emergence and growth of national, regional and international non-governmental organizations has enabled women to have access to facilities for organizing their lives and work...reversing the trend of inequitable development on the basis of gender (1992:6).

Planeta Femea, organized by the same group as the Miami meeting, was the largest among the hundreds of tents set up at the NGO Global Forum at Flamingo Park in Rio de Janeiro. It hosted heated debates among representatives of women's networks on economic, political and social issues leading to successful input to the women's chapter of Agenda 21—the official outcome of the UNCED governmental meeting. The speeches and panels were interspersed with an international marketplace of discussion and trading of crafts and books with interludes where local Brazilian women staged demonstrations against mining companies or Nestlé and in favour of breastfeeding. At Planeta Femea, women's networks and organizations met across different concerns, and in the Global Forum, they intermingled with ecologists and representatives from peace movements, trade unions, youth organizations, development NGOs and local community groups in what was to become one of the first in a series of counter-events to UN meetings in the 1990s.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> These carefully staged testimonies and judgements began with a code of Earth Ethics where speakers included the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai and continued with statements on how women are saving natural systems in the environment and fostering positive development; and also how science, technology and population are constructing regimes that women are resisting. The conclusion was that "women have a wealth of knowledge and experience in environmental issues. Their expertise should clearly be utilized in planning and implementing the policies necessary to overcome the problems identified" (WEDO 1992:13). The outcome was an intriguing mix of strategies aimed at the establishment, and at the same time at building women's own autonomy to act.

<sup>22</sup> There are many reports written in 1992 and after on the Earth Summit process besides Agenda 21 (UNDPI 1992). As editor of the *WIDE Bulletin*, I wrote a series of reports (WIDE 1992), and the special issue of the journal *Development* was dedicated to the Earth Summit (Development 1992, Vol. 2). Other international NGOs that wrote about the Earth Summit from a critical perspective included the Third World Network and the Northern Alliance for Sustainability; among those that wrote about women's contribution to the Earth Summit included WEDO, DAWN, Isis and the APDC Gender and Development Programme. Much of the grey literature, where

Like the Miami meeting, the recognition of differences as well as the strong appeal to solidarity and a collective voice marked the Planeta Femea. Antrobus stated that

women did what our governments were unable to do: women of the South did succeed in changing the terms of the debate as well as get women of the North to adopt our analysis. This kind of solidarity has been emerging within the framework of the UN Decade of Women (APDC 1992:9).

The statements and discussions of these meetings aimed to break through the boxes set by the mainstream development agenda. The women's agenda was far ranging, bringing together in a holistic and critical account all of the "women's issues" – sexuality and health, reproductive rights and reproductive health issues, fair pay and access to work outside the home, violence against women, legal rights to land and to political decision making, the fight against big corporations destroying community and nature, the struggle for peace, the basic needs of the economic poor, North-South inequalities, gender blindness of economics and development policy. The concept of environment and development was pushed far beyond the sustainable development paradigm introduced by the Earth Summit as women's experiences and shared knowledge combined with a political sophistication of how to tackle mainstream ideas and policy. The focus was on militarism, debt, trade and inequality, and was conscious of the North-South spilt, particularly around population issues.

The danger was that the sense of celebration and inclusion of all women could lead to a naive essentialism. The emphasis was, therefore, about finding strategic common ground, along with a shared sense of optimism that the women's movement could take on the establishment. Let me quote two of the paragraphs of the Women's Declaration at the 1992 Global Forum endorsing the Women's Action Agenda 21:

Paragraph 1: The recognition of the centrality of women's roles, needs, values and wisdom to decision-making on the fate of the Earth and the urgent need to involve women at all levels of policy making, planning and implementation on an equal basis with men.

Paragraph 4: The establishment of an alternative order of economic, social, cultural and political interaction based on gender balance, and equity and justice for all peoples, species and generations.

Interestingly, although the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) was the main organizer, it was Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), a global South research-based women's network that provided much of the strategic analysis of the final document (Antrobus 2004).

The practices that emerged during the ensuing years in order to put these ideas into motion in the official arena were complex, requiring the wherewithal to negotiate with governments, UN agencies, international financial institutions, the private sector and academic institutions. Several alliances were formed in order to achieve this goal, some with funding to form organizations with offices in the power hot spots – largely Washington or New York. WEDO, made up of key women from the environment, reproductive rights and economic justice movement, emerged to play a strong role in motivating women around the UN processes with Congresswoman Bella Abzug's team centred in New York (WEDO 1992).<sup>23</sup> An alliance among European, American and Southern networks, which was coordinated from New York and fed into the multiple processes around the United Nations, eventually evolved into the Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ).<sup>24</sup> Charlotte Bunch from the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers University in New Jersey brought a strong global focus

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most of the spirit of the Earth Summit was captured, is now archived or lost as NGOs closed down or moved on. The Oxfam journal *Gender and Development* covered aspects of the debate in its 1992–1994 issues.

<sup>23</sup> [www.wedo.org](http://www.wedo.org).

<sup>24</sup> [www.wicej.org](http://www.wicej.org).

to women's human rights.<sup>25</sup> And many other groups, such as DAWN<sup>26</sup> and Women in Development Europe (WIDE)<sup>27</sup> were visibly strengthened through the networking at Miami and Rio de Janeiro as was evident in their work, which spun off into other global and regional events.<sup>28</sup>

The Miami and Rio de Janeiro meetings were historic moments that fostered a collective feeling of hope and excitement and a sense of power that women could negotiate with government, learn about diverse women's lives, cut through the gender bias of research, and ultimately bring about transformative practices that would end the boxed-in categories of women, population, health, rights, environment, economics and culture.

## Phase Two: Entanglements with the Gender and Development Discourse

In the 1990s, the progressive global women's movement emerged as one of the visible players in the UN arenas. The effort made to engage with the global development agenda and to produce a process of empowerment that countered the hegemonies of knowledge and power that had been analysed in Miami and Rio de Janeiro is evident. Referring again to the Foucauldian notion of biopower, during these years women became embedded in the dominant development discourse. Some saw it as co-option; certainly, it was a time-consuming and difficult process for those women who were engaged in it. Even while protesting at the disempowering impacts of development, producing counter-knowledge and proposing other practices, women were tied into what a Foucauldian reading would call an array of procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations and tactics. In these many engagements, the global women's movement became caught up in microstrategies that brought their issues into the UN arena, but in the process of biopower the female body became an individual and social subject of development.

In the negotiations within the intergovernmental processes, the global women's rights movement aimed to empower women, change the gender bias and inequities in development policy and achieve gender justice. Essentially, in UN-speak it was about "mainstreaming" gender in development or making women's work and lives visible in development policy and arguing that women were key to putting "sustainable" development "into practice". If women were the key, it therefore followed that women's lives and rights should be more acknowledged and considered, more resources should reach women—particularly in poor and marginalized communities—and more women should be in decision-making positions. The global women's rights movement took up each UN conference in turn and gender-mainstreamed it as well as highlighting different regional specific needs. It was a highly organized strategic process.

The set of slogans and buzzwords around the 1990s UN conferences illustrates the strategic way that women mainstreamed women's rights and gender concerns, for example, "women's rights are human rights" at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna 1994, placing women and reproductive rights and health "centre stage" at the Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, working with social movements to bring gender concerns into "human-centred development" and "fair trade" and "decent work" at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, adding the previously unspoken issues of sexual choice and violence against women to the more acceptable peace and women's political representation at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and underlining

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<sup>25</sup> [www.cwgl.rutgers.edu](http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu).

<sup>26</sup> [www.dawnorg.org](http://www.dawnorg.org).

<sup>27</sup> [www.eurosur.org/wide/home.htm](http://www.eurosur.org/wide/home.htm).

<sup>28</sup> There are many other women's groups, I list here only those with which I have been most closely associated. For others, see the "Window on the World" section in *Development*, Vol. 45, No. 2 and Vol. 46, No. 2, which lists many other global and regional groups actively engaged in women's movement politics.



women's key role in food security at the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996. These represented major shifts in UN approaches and, as the lobbying and advocacy continued in the series of five-year reviews, there was an overall agreement that women and gender as defined by these core global women's rights networks working closely with the UN and government bureaucracies could no longer be ignored.

As women's rights and gender equality were absorbed conceptually into international development debates, women were invited to take up higher positions in the bureaucracy, gender experts were established, documents were rewritten and many manuals were presented on how to gender mainstream. As the push continued to have a "gender perspective" in all areas of development, even to some extent in the trade negotiations in the newly formed World Trade Organization (WTO) and in the conferences around financing for development, the global progressive women's movement was among the players.

As the UN conferences moved through different topics, so did the gender and development expertise expand from the environment to rights, population, social development, habitat, women, food, trade and finance. Women, as both objects and subjects, became part of the public sphere of development discourse.

I do not wish to imply that this was a simple task of adding women to the largely male-dominated development policy scene. The set of discursive practices that determined the language, policy, funding and type of projects to be introduced into "developing countries" were decidedly complex political procedures that demanded skill and capacity to handle. The most important arenas in the United Nations demanded time and knowledge if women's organizations were to enter with the intent to change global agendas. This involved careful organizing and thematic, regional and global women's caucusing (WEDO 19924). WEDO, as a New York-based network with a dynamic visible leadership working with others "in the know" took the lead, particularly at the UN global conferences. Along with other key networks, it held briefings and caucuses, often distributing the texts that were to be negotiated on computer disc so that the women would have "their text" ready to hand to the often less organized government delegations. Such processes meant daily information sharing, dealings with the official governmental delegations, and knowing how and with which governments to liaise. In between meetings it meant strategically seeking out the sympathizers in the UN bureaucracies in order to decide which issues to lobby for and which ones to let go. This ongoing process was time consuming and also involved the search to find funds to build the capacity of different representatives of the women's movements around the world to visit New York and other UN conference venues.

In capital cities around the world, women preparing for these events had to search for the types of venues in which to gather in order to strategize. It also meant finding the right people who had the time and knowledge to prepare national or regional viewpoints. And, in terms of dissemination to those in power and to the women's movement in general, it also led to creative ways of multimedia reporting through the increasingly available Internet and alternative media connections. Within the networks, there were also the decisive strategic decisions over what research and knowledge to pursue with which women and what methods for whom as well as when and in what form. There was the continual struggle to understand and to translate UN-speak.<sup>29</sup>

In these discursive practices, the discourse around women and global development—whether on rights, population, social development, food security, empowerment, environment or trade negotiations—grew into a small industry of proliferating NGOs, institutions of gender experts and women's networks closely attached to the UN processes. These were the women who could

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<sup>29</sup> See Gittler (1999); Petchesky (2002); Antrobus (2004); and Fraser and Tinker (2004). It is possible to follow these debates in the newsletters archived on the Web sites of Isis, DAWN, WIDE, the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights, SID-WID and WICEJ; in particular, see the *DAWN Informs* Anniversary Issue (October 2004), which reviews 20 years of translating UN-speak.

negotiate the maze of corridors in the basement of the United Nations. They understood who was who in the agencies and, at times, they also worked for those agencies. They knew the moment to enter the assembly room of a UN event and when to have a coffee or chat in the corridor. They were the ones who organized and briefed the newcomers and called for caucuses. They could liaise and, perhaps, eventually join the delegations. And as the media became more effective, they were the ones who could report efficiently and quickly, cut through the maze of jargon and link women at home to the debates. These were the women who defined the global “women’s” or gender position. They were able to interpret and explain the trends of the discussion. Their writings, speeches and reports charted and interpreted the move from women in development to gender and development, from population to reproductive health, from sustainable development to sustainable livelihoods and from economic growth to economic justice. They had the skills and links, or knew women who had – to find the funds from the UN agencies and governments – to attend and be part of the discussions. They were the ones that lobbied for women’s voices to be heard, who could advise on how to mainstream gender and were among those trusted in government and among the bureaucracy to recommend the funded participants for the regional and global meetings; they were the experts who could take the message back home, if indeed they returned home.

These micropractices of talented and committed women helped build a new set of biopolitical practices around the female body, as women negotiated their way through the UN scene. The process opened up officialdom, provided a space for women to meet and share, debate, provoke and advocate and to put their agenda on the global UN arena. It was these efforts that put the issues of violence against women, sexual choice, reproductive rights and health, maternal mortality, access to natural resources, gender justice, gender and trade and the care economy on the global development agenda. By the end of the 1990s, women were no longer, in the official parlance, the “poorest of the poor” victims without control over their own lives. The global process also gave political support to many concerned about injustice locally – it was a way to move from often intractable national level problems to the global arena. The UN conferences gave credibility to women’s issues, which were usually safely ignored on the local front. And, at the same time, the proliferation of UN meetings and the political need to “engender” the debate provided jobs and careers and visibility to those engaged as, indeed, male colleagues had been doing for years.

Given the roots of many of the women engaged in local body political struggles, it is not surprising that in the end there was a sense not of achievement, but of frustration. The ample literature and debates between women’s NGOs and organizations at WSF debates captured in the reports in newsletters, such as those of DAWN, Isis-Manila, WICEJ, WIDE and SID’s journal *Development*,<sup>30</sup> illustrate a strong sense of unease with the mammoth effort to keep engaged and push for change.

As Wichterich states:

Now as ever before women must carry on struggling for social justice, legal security and the power to make decisions and shape their lives. In the women’s movements of the future some will fight for equality and rights within the existing system, while others develop counter strategies and feminist alternatives to that system (2000:168).

Reviewing those years, it is possible to see how women’s groups entered into a dominant set of biopolitical practices, and in doing so reinforced many of the oppressive techniques they were challenging in the first place. Women were no doubt aware of the dangers of becoming part of the system, and knew that the time spent on these large meetings was detracting from other actions. It was a strategic choice, but one that misjudged the way in which power and knowledge work through bureaucracies, negotiations and the infinitesimal mechanisms that are

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<sup>30</sup> [www.dawn.org.fj](http://www.dawn.org.fj); [www.wicej.org](http://www.wicej.org); [www.wide-network.org](http://www.wide-network.org); [www.isis.org](http://www.isis.org); [www.sidint.org/development](http://www.sidint.org/development).

continually renewing and reinvesting power in procedures determining “green rooms”, pass systems, invited guests and lobbying procedures, among others. Essentially, this meant that the very process of dialogue that would allow women to voice concerns would then turn it into an elaborate process of committees, agreements, loans and projects creating a straitjacket of terms so that the concern, however genuinely expressed, was lost.

Even in the less overtly political strategy of building new knowledge and research, there were similar entanglements. A strategic choice to back up the engagement with the UN policy machinery was for women researchers to classify and gather new women focused on gender-aware knowledge in order to enter and challenge the global development discourses on technical and scientific grounds. Women gathered information on women's and men's lives “on the ground” and then used the quantitative and qualitative research material to articulate multiple gender needs in the sophisticated and complicated bureaucratic and political arenas. Beyond the question of whether these research processes actually benefited the women who were assumed to be the “main beneficiaries”, it was difficult to change what was acceptable evidence-based work in the UN institutional structure. Inevitably, the process had to distort the validity of those “grassroots” experiences or risk being further marginalized and ignored. There arose, therefore, a whole industry within the United Nations, governmental bureaux on women, NGOs and development research institutes that began to collect “case studies”, measure the level of poverty, compare the types of distress, rate the success of what were labelled coping strategies, find new indicators to measure and show success or failure, and compare and rate one nation's poverty or gender gap against another. There was a concerted search for methodologies to combine feminist thinking with development approaches. “Women in development” or “gender in development” became described and translated into documents and research through qualitative and quantitative measurements to show development policy makers in government, the UN and the Bretton Woods and international financial institutions—those with the money and the decision-making power—that gender concerns were valid and scientific and worthy of special policy and funding. Images of women scrounging in rubbish heaps or walking in decimated forests with a jar of water on their heads and a baby on their back, young girls leaning over factory assembly lines or crouched in sweatshop making sports shoes, a dying pregnant woman, the scarred face of a victim of acid throwing, the pained eyes of a girl who had undergone female genital mutilation, the plea of a sex worker dying of HIV/AIDS and the huddle of ragged women and skeletal babies in refugee camps were codified into reports and documents as the realities that the Vienna, Copenhagen, Cairo, Beijing, Rome and New York conferences could ameliorate.

The discourse in this codification simplified the vastly different experiences of women around the world who come from so many different cultures and backgrounds. Through the UN official texts, background reports, statistics and evidence, these experiences became the generic gendered female body—the poor woman with an expertly understood set of needs and rights. She was depicted in various guises.<sup>31</sup> She was no longer a victim in need of aid, but a working subject with productive potential, a willing and useful agent for development. A whole range of assumptions—often captured in glossy texts with catchy headings<sup>32</sup>—were made about this productive female body:

- educate poor women and you educate the next generation;
- train poor women for a job and your investment is guaranteed;
- give poor women credit and the whole family benefits;

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<sup>31</sup> As Hartmann describes in the paper to be published in the *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, “Eve is black, primitive and pregnant and her reproduction is the Original Sin”: the negative images have a reservoir of core stereotypes that resonate deeply in the psyche of believers, in this case, the religious power in the United States concerned about overpopulation (Betsey Hartmann, email correspondence, 20 May 2005).

<sup>32</sup> There are many examples available, including from international networks such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation that have adopted sophisticated marketing techniques to promote their messages.

- teach poor women about sprayed nets to prevent malaria and you save a whole community;
- replace poor women with men in a factory and you have a docile and effective workforce for less pay and less trouble;
- sterilize poor women and you control unwanted children and prevent a population explosion.

These were the messages, often not so hidden, that reinterpreted the women's rights movements' arguments for autonomy, rights and gender equality. The complex links between health, reproductive life cycles, the caring economy, the market economy, the environment and what was increasingly known by the end of this period as globalization, were repackaged by technical expertise into understandable development concerns. They were put through the UN machine of debate and policy making and came out as the issues that governments could agree to, but, it has to be said, rarely followed up.

The gender and development discourse, despite all of the attempts to connect social, economic and gender justice, smoothed away the links in its practice and language. In the biopolitics of the management of gender, women's rights, the female body, women and gender issues remained the "soft" issues of development. So, when it came to why there were no real reforms that took these concerns into account, or even why there was less and less money to train women, provide health services, counter violence against women, the answer could always be that there were other more pressing concerns to deal with—for example, war, failed states, internal conflict, economic crisis, restructuring, liberalizing markets, security, trade agreements—all of which did not seem, in the end, to have much to do with women's demands and case studies, which were mostly still considered microlevel adjuncts to the "hard" macrodevelopment issues.

The global women's rights movement's attempt to bring women's multiple needs and concerns into the development discourse was translated in the development body politic as an essentially passive "productive, reproductive and sexualized female body" that was managed and understood through various mechanisms—essentially as new workers with specific health and education needs as well as needing special protection from conflict, violence or unfair work practices, and even sexual exploitation and domestic injustice.

These paradigm shifts were certainly an improvement from earlier development policy where women were more or less invisible. There was a more holistic understanding of women's lives and a recognition that data on the complexity of their lives were missing, and women needed to be given new space in development projects. As productive bodies, women were redefined as the new workforce that needed management and care. The feminization of labour heralded them as the semi-skilled factory worker, the home worker and the informal worker whose industriousness was welcomed. In the more liberal discourse, women's rights to better pay, health and safety as well as access to better jobs and other labour markets were also underlined. "Third world women" were depicted as working double and triple working days, slaving in the home and toiling in the field as farmers or in the urban slums as the newly recruited global workforce, as well as the main carers of the environment and culture in both urban and rural areas.

As maternal bodies, women needed support to control and space childbirth and, less vocally, not to die in the process of childbirth. As HIV/AIDS hit the scene irrefutably by the late 1990s, these hardworking maternal bodies became prone not only to maternal mortality and morbidity, but also to an epidemic illness that attacked them for both biological and social reasons. In addition, as the discourse became more nuanced, the sexualized body was overlaid on the productive maternal body, particularly as the case studies began to point to violence against women as a major deterrent for women to enjoy "the full benefits of development". The battered and raped body, the disfigured or the sexually exploited body became another icon in development discourse with a focus on sex work and refugees, trafficking of women and girls

and a parallel concern with female genital mutilation, child brides, dowry deaths and commercialized and victimized bodies.

The gender and development discourse, as it emerged from the 1990s UN conferences and gender and development programmes and research that surrounded them, essentially continued to create a colonized poor and marginalized woman who needed to be managed, educated, trained for work and local decision making, and controlled reproductively and sexually through a multiple series of development processes designed for "women's empowerment".

The specificities of the actual lives lived in these representative female bodies are hard to discern. Even if the claim was for regional and cultural difference, the demands of a global discourse brushed away the differences. It was, of course, possible in the gender-aware global development discourse to speak of broadly different concerns and characteristics of women in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab region, Central and Latin America, East Asia and the Pacific, and East Europe, for example. Compared across regions, the average woman could expect different experiences during moments in her life cycle that development policy could predict, monitor and try to change with more education and better health, more solid investments and more advantageous markets and trade regimes. Interestingly, women who lived in North America, Europe and Australasia—not migrants or indigenous women who became self-defined as "Fourth World" women and were largely outside official UN debates—were lumped together as the developed woman representing the wealth and values of the West who, more or less, had the money, access, rights and the status for which these other groups of women needed to strive.<sup>33</sup>

These biopolitical prescriptions were the unsatisfactory result of the different practices and types of knowledge that the global discourse of gender and development that the body politic produced.

Perhaps the most ironic result of the UN agreements negotiated in thousands of consultations and engagements of members of women's groups are the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that emerged from the Millennium Declaration in 2000 (Harcourt 2004; Barton 2005). The MDGs have the overall goal to halve global poverty by 2015 and to make donor countries more accountable and live up to all of the promises of the UN conferences. There are eight measurable and defined goals in the MDGs,<sup>34</sup> with 48 attached indicators and a host of UN mechanisms to ensure their implementation—national reports, global campaigns, research projects, UN-wide monitoring and statistical assessments. Women's empowerment is measured in Goal 3 by the level of girls' primary and secondary education, and another goal is to reduce maternal mortality. For the rest, gender is stated as a cross-cutting theme, such as health systems and human rights, though none of these have clear indicators. Many of the major issues—such as sexuality, reproductive rights and health, and violence against women—that the women's movement pushed so hard to include in the global development agenda are missing. They are discussed around the process, but the actual goals fail to mention them.

Women's movements that have been engaged in the United Nations at all levels around the UN Conferences of the 1990s...approach the MDGs with mixed feelings...there is great concern that they sideline key gains made in Beijing, Cairo and other UN Conferences, set a minimalist agenda and fail to integrate gender perspectives into all eight goals (Barton 2005; see also Grown 2005).

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<sup>33</sup> The latest example of this is The Wye River Call to Action for Global Women's Health, in circulation by email. It was drawn up by an expert meeting on global women's health on 7 June 2005 and signed by Madeline Albright and Mary Robinson. It contains such blanket statements as "countless women and girls suffer the health consequences of malnutrition, chronic and communicable diseases that disproportionately affect women, gender-based violence, harmful traditional practices, and war and civil conflict...women are vital to the future development of their countries" (personal email to the author, 13 June 2005).

<sup>34</sup> The goal of partnership for development was added in 2002 at the International Conference on Financing for Development, held in Monterrey, Mexico.

In the MDG process, the engagement of the global women's movement with the goals has been one of contestation and distrust, although by working through the broader coalition around the call against poverty, women are continuing to strategically place their representatives in the small spaces offered for civil society's engagement. UN agencies continue to have their civil society committees with those "in the know" from the UN conferences advising behind closed doors, and their reports join the proliferating number of UN documents on the array of Web sites that the United Nations maintains as its official face to the world (Harcourt 2005a).<sup>35</sup> Consultations with civil society are conducted mainly through e-discussions in which "everyone" is invited to join, and though a knowledge of English and UN bureaucracy is a definite requisite, and time and access to a computer preclude many from participating, there are still many thousands who join in.<sup>36</sup>

### Phase Three: Joining in the Movement of Movements

The global women's rights movement since 2000 is clearly tired—"conferenced out"—and sceptical about the MDGs and other bureaucratic processes. In their fifth global monitoring report, which is bluntly called *Beijing Betrayed*, June Zeitlin, executive director of WEDO, points out that "the reports here are a testimony to women as agents of change and give us cause for celebration", but also that

the reports speak loudly: the women of the world don't want any more words from their governments—they want action, they want resources and they want an end to the environment that is increasingly hostile to women's rights (WEDO 2005:1).

There is a weariness not just of UN conferences, but of all the official talk shops and in the committees and commissions that hardly consult. The energy needed to "engender" global development seems daunting, and there appears to be a retreat sounded from the UN arena.

Going back to biopower as a way to understand this shift, a reverse locus of biopower has emerged. This can be understood as a counter-politics that is a part of biopolitics. In the sense that the women's movement played a role in creating the dominant power knowledge, there were also nodes of resistance created within it. In the skills learned and knowledge gathered in those micropractices, there was also resistance. The biopower functions through a fluid disorder where power resides not only in the dominant hegemonic structures, but also in the engagement and resistance to them.

As the women's movements confronted, analysed and resisted the growing rise of economic and religious fundamentalism, the spread of neoliberal dogma, the weakness of the United Nations in the face of the undeniable dominance of the United States, the unravelling of women's rights and the continued victimizing and sexualizing of women's bodies, new strategies began to be formed.

As one feminist engaged in the WSF process stated:

The commodification of women's bodies has changed shape to a subtler form, with the appropriation of feminist language distorting feminist political goals and providing new challenges to address. International institutions such as the UN and the global financial institutions exclude women from decision-

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<sup>35</sup> [www.un.org](http://www.un.org).

<sup>36</sup> For example, the Millennium Project set up a listserv through ActionAid and Panos South Asia to monitor civil society responses to their conclusions on Goal 3 of the MDGs (to promote gender equality and empower women), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) hosted an ongoing debate called GenderNet on the MDGs, but there are no official consultations or meetings as a group globally with NGOs with the commissions that are expert in these affairs. At the national level, NGOs are invited to contribute to the MDG process, but according to the North-South Institute report, very few involved NGOs report being consulted by UNDP, which is heading the reporting process.

making processes, but target women for anti-poverty programs at the community level, raising questions of whether gender mainstreaming and local participation schemes are actually addressing women's needs (Jones 2005:54).

Since 2000, the global women's movement moved out of the halls of the United Nations and began to engage in other movement processes such as fair trade, the care chain linking migrant women and globalization, and campaigns to end debt. Women's movements began to join up with the "new" social movements in a combined struggle against neoliberal globalization, in defence of the community and the common people.

These new social movements, or global justice movement, first emerged during the mass protests against the WTO ministerial in Seattle in 1999.<sup>37</sup> They had a distinctly international viewpoint, and while some had participated in the processes linked to the UN conferences in the 1990s, many came out of local environmental and peace movements, consumer campaigns, socialist parties and worker's rights movements. These movements came together to contest neoliberal globalization, and later, to form the antiwar coalitions that were formed after the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States, and make up the broad alliance of movements that forged the WSF processes.

This new global justice movement is in itself a product of globalization, working in horizontal and decentralized structures or network structures aided by globalized communication systems such as the Internet, which are decentralized and built on an open cooperative infrastructure. In their actions of resistance, they are part of a countervailing locus of power that responds to the movement and flow of capital and investment. The rapid transformation of companies globally has led to new alliances between North and South trade unions, movements of consumers, environmentalists and farmers organizations.

In relation to development discourse, the global social justice movement has focused resistance on the big international institutions, with major demands such as cancellation of debt or rejection of the International Monetary Fund interventions. The movement grew quickly with the massive international mobilizations against the war in Iraq and the growing global protest of the George W. Bush Administration "war on terror" and aggressive intervention or nation building, following an economic and political blueprint largely designed by the multilateral financial institutions in Washington backed by military and strategic implementation.

In 1999, 30,000 militants blocked the WTO conference in Seattle. In 2001, 300,000 demonstrated against the Group of 8 (G8) in Genoa and, to remain with the Italian example, three million protested in the streets in 2002 against a new labour law and three million again in 2003 against the war in Iraq (Aguiton 2005).

Strategically, the focus of the global women's movement shifted. This is not to say that support for development processes that aim to defend health, education, reproductive and productive rights, for example, diminished, but the global women's strategy for bringing about change diversified after Seattle and there are attempts to engage in the new forms of global politics emerging around the WSF processes.

Since 2000, the global progressive women's movement was looking for space in the alternative globalization movement. Given the holistic approach to women's rights and body politics, the global justice movement claims should be welcoming to the women's movement.

However, it is not proving, thus far, to be as welcoming as perhaps one might think. The complex forms of gender oppression in modern society that produce, fix and co-opt gender relations through various techniques are not only in the United Nations, but also in the social

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<sup>37</sup> The analysis in this section is based on the articles and interviews on or by leading analysts and activists engaged in the WSF process published in the *Development* issue on "Movement of Movements" in June 2005.

movement processes. Patriarchal and hegemonic economic powers are not only static or governed solely by force or the rule of law, they are also horizontal, fluid and disordered. Women's strategies of resistance to patriarchal practices are also needed in this new domain and, as with the United Nations, the resistance itself becomes a process of shaping new practices and new possibilities for gender relations. Even the United Nations is no longer perceived as the only major site of transformative political processes, though this does not mean that the WSF process is free of essentially patriarchal power games.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, there seems to be a decided shift by global women's rights movements to participate in the global justice movement. There are several explanations for this, beyond the disillusionment with the United Nations. Women's holistic concerns seem to have more resonance with the strong critique of neoliberal fundamentalism and, in addition, the increasing geopolitical tensions and conflicts of post-9/11 require new alliances and new processes that the UN MDG security-led agenda is not providing (Harcourt 2005b).

Other points of connection are the interest in horizontal rather than vertical power structures, the attempt to listen to all groups and not to impose order from hierarchical, central power structures, and the effort to create learning spaces for new and better ways of working together that reflect the global women's rights movements' attempt to work with consensus building (Bullard 2005). The WSF's attempt to break away from single ideological narratives of the traditional left such as Marxists, trade unions and ecologists, among others, and efforts to build a new politics from diverse points of view, struggles and tension was clearly attractive.

The WSF perspective and process aims at:

overcoming the rigid separation between economy, politics, society, culture and subjectivity. It is creating the possibility for agendas that aim at cultural subversion, including those of sexuality and equity, to be included as an integral component of the broader movement for economic justice and the deepening of democracy (Vargas 2005:108)

As feminist agendas have shifted in their engagement with global agendas, the goal is to integrate gender justice with economic justice, along with cultural subversion as a strategy for more long-term transformation. Vargas (2005) observes that the global women's rights movements have introduced to the movement of movements the importance of understanding the impact of neoliberalism, not only in relation to economic rights, but also in relation to the gender dimensions of social change and cultural struggles over meanings, including feminist struggles around sexuality and equity.

In the global justice movement, the global women's movement is also confronting the expression of tensions within the movement. They are beginning to incorporate diversity not only in women's lives, but also in multicultural diverse ethnic struggles. The WSF is a terrain of engagement, but also one of contestation between new and old structures of thought and action. As a way to engage more fruitfully in this struggle, members of the transnational women's movement have held Feminist Dialogues in 2004 and 2005<sup>39</sup> in order to strategize both in relation to the feminist agenda and their role in the larger social movements, and specifically to make feminist concerns much more central to what was perceived as essentially a male-dominated space where women's movements inhabited the margins, even if individual women are among the stars and spokespeople—for example, Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva, Naomi Klein and Susan George.

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<sup>38</sup> See WICEJ (2004); Riccutelli et al. (2004); Fraser and Tinker (2004); Antrobus (2004); Kerr et al. (2004).

<sup>39</sup> The Co-ordinating Group for the Feminist Dialogue 2005 consisted of Isis International (Manila), DAWN, INFORM (Sri Lanka), WICEJ, Articulacion Feminista de Mercosur (Latin America/Caribbean), African Women's Development and Communication Network (Africa) and the National Network of Autonomous Women's Groups (India).



The Feminist Dialogue at the fifth WSF in January 2005 looked at three interrelated axes of reflection-action: (i) neoliberal globalization; (ii) militarism and war; and (iii) fundamentalisms. The integrating emphasis of these realities is the body as a site of politics that acts as a mediator of lived social and cultural relations in that it is not only tied to the private sphere, or to the individual being, but is also inherently linked to the local, to the public and to the global spheres.

Potentially, the movement of movements creates the space for the global progressive women's movement to broaden the spectrum of feminist action from the struggles for the democratization of gender relations to struggles against racism, militarism, homophobias, economic injustice and environmental degradations, among others. The challenge that has not yet been fully taken up is to engage the broader global social movement in discussions and actions that understand gender relations as transversal and cross-cutting—starting with the body—within the many democratic political and cultural struggles that women in countless social justice movements are waging.

The challenge is to make the body politics inherent in the “feminization of labour” and the “increasing fundamentalist ideology that goes beyond the religious sphere, opens up spaces for exclusionary, authoritarian ways of thinking that impact women's lives and bodies in multiple ways” (Jones 2005:55) one of the concerns of the alternative globalization movement. The 49th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) on 28 February–11 March 2005 in New York, also known as Beijing+10, was held in lieu of a Fifth World Conference on Women—breaking the run from 1975 of UN Conferences on Women.<sup>40</sup> Key networks of the global women's movement put out a call for women to attend the New York event and participate in a global week of action around International Women's Day on 8 March. The 2,700 NGOs registered to attend were a show of strength and support of global women's rights. But the UN events were not the key focus for the global progressive women's movement. It was an interesting moment of intersection between the UN-based and progressive women's groups from the WSF process. Women's groups used the UN space to lobby governments and push back reactionary responses of the US and other governments. But outside the United Nations, spaces were created to strategize around how women's global politics need to intersect with other social movements. For example, there was a strategy meeting combined with a dance party in SoHo to mark feminist support for the GCAP. The women distributed white bandanas, the feminist version of the white band, symbol of the Make Poverty History campaign. This meeting was the nucleus of the global women's networks that were mobilizing as feminists within a broader coalition to end poverty. On International Women's Day, Code Pink, a women's peace movement that mobilized US women against Iraq, called on international women's groups to march from Times Square to the United Nations to protest the Iraq War. Other strategy meetings brought together trade unions, faith organizations, reproductive rights groups, alternative globalization groups, development NGOs and women's human rights groups.

During the CSW meeting, it was evident that the United Nations and the fight against US unilateralism and the attempt to dismantle it may be one site for action for the global women's movement. However, there were other sites of action that overlapped and went beyond the UN discourse in the spaces being created by the global justice movement, born out of profound dissatisfaction of the post-Seattle era and as an expression of discontent after the UN conferences of the 1990s.

So, where is the energy of the global progressive women's movement in 2005, a year that has been heralded as a key one in the UN development community with the five-year Millennium

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<sup>40</sup> Why the conference was not held has been the subject of much discussion among women's networks, although principally it was because of a lack of resources and a change in UN policy away from major conferences that engage civil society, but also due to the strategic concern that the agreed Beijing Platform of Action would be considerably weakened, given the current conservative neoliberal climate if it were subject to debate. Indeed, it proved difficult to receive immediate endorsement of the platform due to the US delegation attempting to bring in reservations.

Review, and in the gender and development community with the “non-event” of a fifth world conference on women?

There seems to have been a strategic consolidation around the global call against poverty. A coalition of progressive networks, movements and NGOs led by a consortium of major NGOs—for example, ActionAid and Oxfam International—are lobbying at major political events such as the G8 meetings and the WTO ministerials and at UN events, including the two World Summits around the MDGs, as entry points for consultations.<sup>41</sup>

Global progressive women’s movement have set up a listserv and committee of representatives to ensure that the progressive and feminist voices are at the key events and a part of the decision-making processes. Through the Internet consultations following the strategy meetings at the CSW, the focus is on keeping an inclusive and accountable process moving forward in support of the women from the global South, who are in the core decision-making groups. The white band days and the political summits as well as the United Nations are the focus of the strategy. It is early days yet to understand how much the gender message is to be integrated into the GCAP, and it has been necessary to put several “gender repair” processes into place.

At the same time, feminists are looking at the WSF process as another strategic venue with which to work in solidarity with other movements. Even though attempts have been made to ensure there are women speakers and spaces for women, the speakers are the well-known people, and the demand to consider gender injustice at the core of the social movement debates is not as yet taken up. There are several areas of uncertainty: (i) the generational differences; (ii) the uncertainties around the process of how to move forward; (iii) the lack of clarity about the level of engagement with the political mainstream; and (iv) the infighting within the international facilitating committee.

## Conclusion

I began by stating that the representation of the global women’s rights movement is fluid and fluctuating, relating to proximity to the main sites of discussion and access to knowledge and funding to contribute and lead the debates. I conclude now with some reflections on the tensions within and around the movement. There are always, as with any global movement, tensions about how to bring in marginal voices, new or old, and how to build capacity to ensure renewed leadership.

The Internet has made a huge difference in linking those living on the margins to those at the centre and to regional representation that challenges any Western feminist dominance. Nevertheless, there are tensions between those active at the local level and those that operate in the international arena. Inevitably, the best-placed and able people and institutions dominate, and although the aim is to be as inclusive as possible, there is also the need for some way to scrutinize who is an ally and who is not. This tends to depend on the level of trust built up over time so that a total outsider to the key networks would not be able to self-select in this process. As with the WSF process, those that can speak and connect to others will build political acceptance within the movement, but since there is a deep suspicion of individuals or new NGOs appearing on the scene, most actors are located within known organizations and NGOs or have contributed over the years to the debate and therefore have had their worth tested.

There is also a lively debate about what feminism is about now, and the answer is different within the different regions. As pointed out, these tensions and sometimes contradictions are smoothed out in the process of consolidation at the public level, but internally there are discussions that can be conflictual about strategic positions toward institutions such as the state

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<sup>41</sup> Information is available at [www.whiteband.org](http://www.whiteband.org); also see the NCD0-SID-WIDE report on *MDGs, Gender Equality and Human Security*, pp. 27–32; for a list of resources, see [www.eurosur.org/wide/project\\_UN.htm](http://www.eurosur.org/wide/project_UN.htm).

and the market and around issues of sexuality. As Braidotti (2002:159) states, "hiding cultural differences among women under the convenient umbrella of a universal or global sisterhood seems both unfair and unworkable".

For example, there is a strategic debate about whether to include feminisms as a reference point in relation to the decidedly negative press that feminism receives in both "old and new" Europe and the United States. There are also different entry points from different regions, and diversity among women's movements that are not tackled for strategic reasons at the global level, but at home or regionally, also shape different histories and make for different politics globally. The question of how to communicate across cultures and ideologies is continually being asked and debated. For example, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries see the market as progressive and a liberating structure for their work, whereas the crumbling of the welfare state and state responsibilities is seen as much more important for core European Union countries.<sup>42</sup>

There are also differences with the South where the women's movement seems to be far less challenged as a valid and vibrant political identity by other social movements or consigned, as it can be in the global North, to a historical period that ended in the 1980s. Northern women are more cautious in global arenas because of the perception that they have won their rights; therefore, gender biases, violence and discrimination are rarely openly questioned. The backlash against feminism can make it politically difficult in the North to ask uncomfortable personal and political questions around body politics. This is in contrast to Southern feminists who tend to feel that their rights are a matter of life and death and as a result will speak up as a political act and demand to be heard. In the global arena, this can lead to different tactics and disagreements about how to tackle the UN arena and also how best to interact with the men determining agendas in the global justice movements.

As Sisonke Mismang states:

There are rifts between women of the North and of the South. There are divisions among older feminists and younger feminists. There are tensions between black feminists and white feminists, and differences of opinion among working class women and elite women, this is as old as the movement itself (Kerr et al. 2004:179).

There are also generational differences. In the North, young women are attracted to the social justice movement—the peace (antiwar), antiglobalization and environment (Greenpeace) movements. They are a strong part of the mass "revival" of pro-peace, antiglobalization resistance and activism, but shy away from the women's movement, either because they see it as historically finished or because they find the agenda to be too narrow and exclusionary of men. This ongoing challenge to engage young women in the global North is not so evident in the CIS or CEE countries where young professionals identify with women's rights or, again, in the different regions of the South. According to one young activist from South Africa, young women in the South are strongly drawn to the women's movements because of their lived realities: lack of access to work and education, unpaid labour and increasing burdens. Underneath, there is always the question of resources and which issues are communicated as the vital ones by organizations. For example, AWID, with many young women on their staff, is making a determined and successful effort to bring young women on board through specific projects that give them a voice, and also to reach out to younger audiences by using the multimedia. DAWN now runs a training centre for young feminists. And the new units set up by the Open Society in Eastern Europe are all about capacity building for young feminists.

Beyond these types of tensions within the women's rights movement, there is also the issue of how and when to link with other social movements. There is a whole set of issues here that is

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<sup>42</sup> See Rowbotham and Linkkogle's (2001) edited collection of essays for an example of the variety of issues across the South and North.

continually being debated in places such as the feminist dialogues held before the 2004 and 2005 WSFs, and also in the coalitions around ending poverty. For example, how to engage in order to ensure that gender issues are understood across the board and women's rights groups' are given a real, rather than a token, role? When to focus on specific women's rights issues and push for other social movements to weigh in behind those issues? How to ensure that alliances are partnerships not parrying for power? How to integrate women and gender issues throughout so that the agenda itself is changed, rather than women being added on as a necessary afterthought?

There is also the set of strategic questions about how to work with the mainstream and defend women's rights from Right-wing fundamentalist attacks, while respecting culture and diversity, and strategically using the global arena to support local women's movements. The use of alternative media and communication has been critical on this strategic front. Indeed, access to technology and communication has been a huge boon to the global women's rights movement; even if access is differential, the gaps are closing and women's global communication networks are ensuring that Southern women's groups receive support, access and often free technology. The main issue here is language, though experiments such as the Babels network of free translators and interpreters<sup>43</sup> are opening up new avenues to make translation more accessible. Strategic ways to reach different publics continue to be a concern of the global progressive women's movement competing with many different resources.

A core concern remains how the global women's rights movements reflect "place-based" struggles of women in their communities and localities around their reproductive and sexual health, livelihood, home and rights. How women at different levels of political engagement can connect across cultural, geopolitical, racial and ethnic divides remains a dynamic process that is being played out. Fluidity through networking, resistances, innovations and mobilizing around global events has limits, and it is clear that individuals often engage in many different political strategies, of which their contribution to the global women's rights movement is just a part.<sup>44</sup> This is where a more nuanced sense of politics is required. As long as one is aware of how power is operating, though not just impositions and force, but also through processes and practices such as those around the United Nations and the global justice movement, then it is possible to strategically use sites of power through engagement in order to change from within. However, knowledge about the different realities on the margins and the centre are crucial, and constant dialogue, debate and openness to contradictions in the struggle are necessary in order to move forward. It is not always going to be necessary to bring local women such as the famous Zapatista movement indigenous women's leader Comandante Esther to the heart of state power (Belausteguigoitia 2004) or to seek to crown black women activists such as Wangari Maathai as Nobel laureates, which are effective strategies at the moment. There are many ways that the global women's rights movement can move forward, for example, through fluid resistance, strategic acknowledgement of its own power and awareness of what can work at what historical moment and not looking to blueprints, but advocating for and understanding change as women's rights activists within diverse global political arenas.

In this struggle, major issues remain: (i) how and when to connect politically to the mainstream; (ii) how to translate women's concerns across a wide range of issues without losing focus or relevance; and (iii) how to build trust and shared knowledge across the generations. Engagement with other social movements are clearly where some of the energy is taking the movement, but at the same time there is also a move to reflect and build knowledge of the process failures and successes of the past years in order to guide the current directions.

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<sup>43</sup> Babels is a network of volunteer organizations resulting from the processes of the WSFs; more information is available at [www.babels.org](http://www.babels.org).

<sup>44</sup> See Harcourt and Escobar (2005) for an exploration of some of these new forms of politics. The edited collection looks at the experiences of women's mobilizations around sexual and reproductive rights, land and community, contested economic terrains, rural and urban environments and global capital that highlights the interrelations between place, gender, politics and justice. The book is intended as a contribution to the analysis of political movements—women's movement and economic and social justice movements, including those evolving around the WSF processes.

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- PP CSSM 2 **Civil Society Organizations and Service Provision**  
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- PP CSSM 1 **Trade Unions and NGOs: A Necessary Partnership for Social Development**  
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