

# How does change happen?

reflections about power, movement-  
building and feminist futures drawn from  
conversations among 1700 women's rights  
advocates over four days and nights

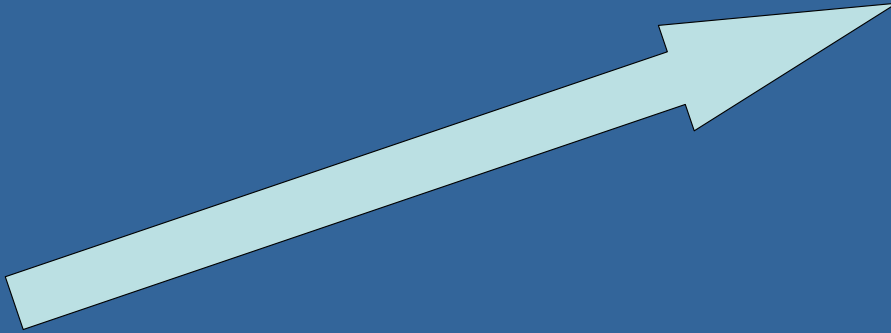
By Lisa VeneKlasen, Just Associates  
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Since we're all starting with our nationality, I'm American – which happens to be one of my most contested identities at the moment.

It's truly humbling to even attempt to “wrap up” a many layered process involving 1700 wise women and men from 120 countries over 4 days and nights. As I add my impressions to the thoughtful reflections of my wonderful colleagues on this panel, I will focus a bit more on the how of change. What did I hear and see about how change happens?

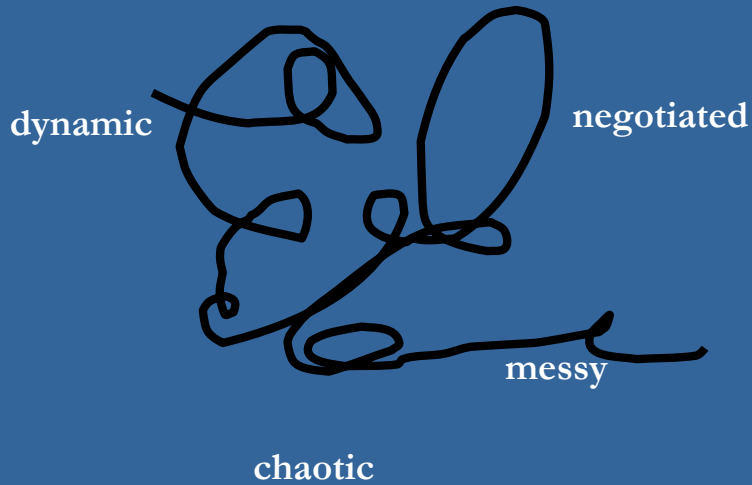
First, despite much talk during this Forum about the need to move beyond our tendency to focus on the negative – which I agree with – I'll begin with what we can firmly say change is NOT.

NOT like this...



It's not linear or straightforward, despite the lofty promises of the log-frames and result-based planning many of us rely upon or simply succumb to.

More like this...



In fact, we can be pretty certain that change is unpredictable and dynamic, not to mention chaotic, messy and full of conflict and compromise. On its best days, change can be a dance – though not very smooth – with three steps forward and two tugs backward, one pull sideways and onward.

Although we know this to be true intuitively, most of us continue to struggle and be frustrated by our over reliance on linear and technical approaches and thinking without the necessary balance of the dynamic and responsive. As one Forum participant wisely said: “Technical skills are necessary but insufficient for cultural warfare.” Yet, our patterns of work often constrain our ability to imagine, think and act in new ways. Many sessions during the Forum continued and deepened the important conversations about what we need to change, but it seems we feminists still have some difficulty talking about the how of change – despite the theme of the Forum.



“Is this change permanent?”



Nevertheless, we can glean many insights about how change happens from the powerful personal experiences shared bravely during plenaries and sessions. While much of our analysis paints a rather grim historical moment at present, many of the personal stories, in contrast, gave us inspiration and understanding about the continuous, negotiated victories and losses, joys and pains, that are involved in change. I think of what Pramada Menon’s mother asked her in response to her personal revelation: “Is this change permanent?” The good and bad news about change is ... well ... that it’s always changing.

## Timelines

*Regional and country realities*

*Creating knowledge*

*Shared analysis*

*Personal & political diversities and perspectives*

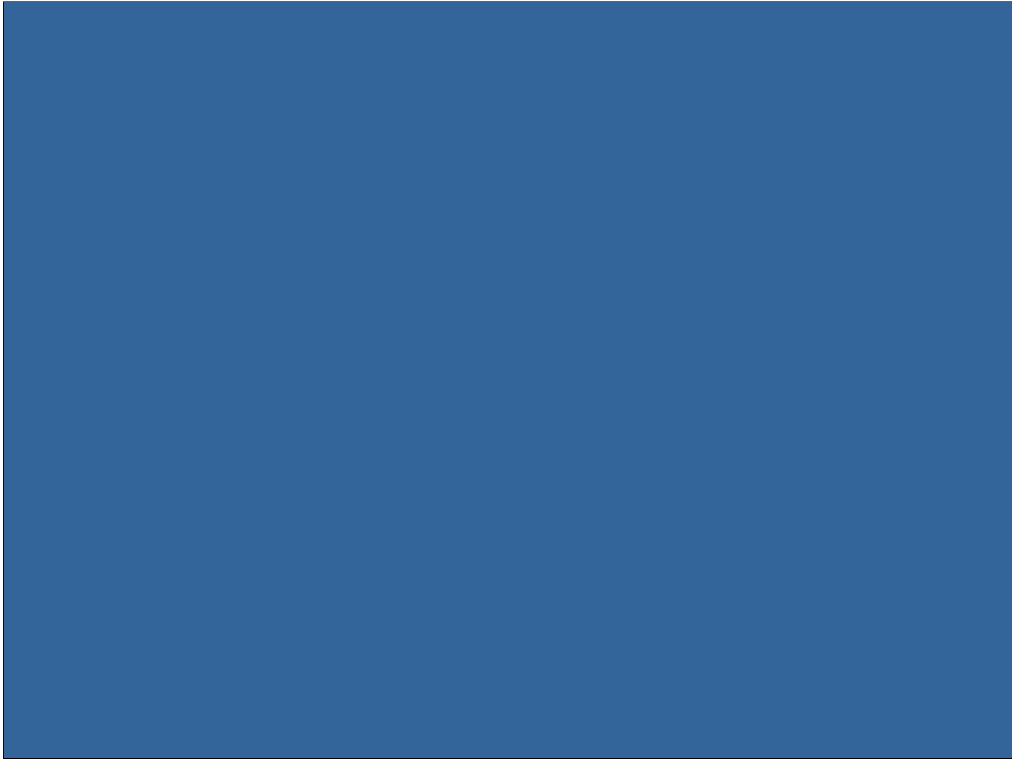


*Cross-generational conversation*

The timelines on Day 1 are full of countless lessons about change but, interestingly, are very difficult to capture. Perhaps they offer a glimpse into the excitement and challenges of movement-building. As an experiment in generating collective knowledge, the task of reconstructing memories and moments from history was predictably chaotic, lacking uniformity and yet, incredibly stimulating. Even fun.

Our timeline constructions were negotiated through conversations that assumed and embraced different perspectives – not without difficulty in some cases. Younger and older participants seemed especially excited by the intergenerational exchanges the activity created. Older women told me how surprised – even inspired – they felt to witness the energy and the number of stickies from younger women on the 2000-05 period, which challenged their pessimism and sense of defeat about the present. Younger women told me how interesting it was to hear personal stories about political events from the 1960s and 70s, a time they'd only imagined and knew little about.

Despite the organizers' efforts at producing a common, minimal set of historical dates for all of the timelines as a starting point, we quickly learned that there is no such thing as a common sense of history that connects us as feminists and women's rights advocates across our regions and localities. Naturally, our sense of what's important in the world depends on the place where we live and the identities and experiences that shape us personally. Even people who live in the same place, see the world differently. The importance of regional, country and local realities in an increasingly 'globalized' world, was hit home by the timeline experiences, and



the theme has repeated itself through these four days as we have been thinking about change.

Despite our different perspectives on the last decades, we still have a number of surprising cross-border reference points that tell us a lot about what connects us. Let me give a few examples from the timelines to illustrate some connects and disconnects:

- The Southeast Asia timeline group added Woodstock to their 1960s decade.
- The Latin America timeline put the Beatles on theirs.
- Older North American women were surprised and amazed that younger women added the TV series “Sex and the City” to their highlights of the 1990s.
- The Middle East timeline instantly took the stikkie about German re-unification off because it was not relevant to their conversation.
- The fact that we referred to the timeline as “Southeast Asia” left East Asians a bit confused, particularly the Chinese participants, who decided to join the Central & Eastern Europe and Commonwealth of Independent States timeline, assuming they had the most in common with the Former Soviet Union.
- This group – CEE/CIS – declared history pre-1990s irrelevant to their discussions and decided to focus on post-1990!

With all their flaws, the timelines were nevertheless a brave and stimulating way to start our conversations about how change happens – no single one of us was the expert at the front of the room and the starting point was our own lives and impressions. Participants have wondered how far our experience of the Forum was shaped by this exuberant, challenging and participatory start to the proceedings.

## NEOLIBERALISM

*Anti-capitalism*

*Alternative & popular  
economics Economic rights*

*Trade union  
perspectives*

*Social Contracts*

## NGO-IZATION

*Non-governmental industrial complex*

## FUNDAMENTALISMS

*Faith Political force*

*Spirituality Secularism  
sense of belonging*

Since it is difficult to talk about the *how* of change without reference to the *what* of change, perhaps we can look at how our analysis has changed since the last AWID Forum.

Neoliberalism was discussed a lot three years ago, but today, it was a given. Now, we seem to be examining the contours and impact of neoliberalism as an eclipsing ideology rather than solely deciphering the policies – though that critical task continues. We’re hearing more open resistance with words like “anti-capitalist” and discussions about re-claiming and rebuilding the social contract. At this forum, the presence and perspectives of trade unions are far more visible, as are alternative and popular economics and powerful examples of economic rights strategies. Political perspectives are once again attempting to demystify economics. As one participant – an economist – said: “ECONOMICS IS POLITICS IN TECHNICAL DRAG.”

“NGO-ization” has become a household word among us, along with deeper critiques of the ‘corporatization’ of social change efforts. As most of us sit within our – dare I say? – NGOs, I sense a sharper critical awareness of the limits and contradictions of ourselves and our organizational forms in relation to the task of making meaningful change happen and, in particular, to the desire to “repoliticize” our work and “build movements”. My favorite terms for the sea in which most of us swim? “NGO industrial complex” and “development circus.”



We deepened discussions about fundamentalisms, sharpening the analysis of religion as a conservative political force and the implications of these forces for laws and governance. Many speakers from different regions – but the Middle East and Latin America in particular – affirm the centrality of secularism in the feminist political agenda. At the same time, this Forum highlighted the need for feminists to reconcile the important role of faith and spirituality in our lives and our work. We need to recognize that faith and spirituality create a sense of belonging and connection that can nurture our own political forces. For many, this was a conversation we need to continue and deepen.

# Futures... the chess game

*technologies*

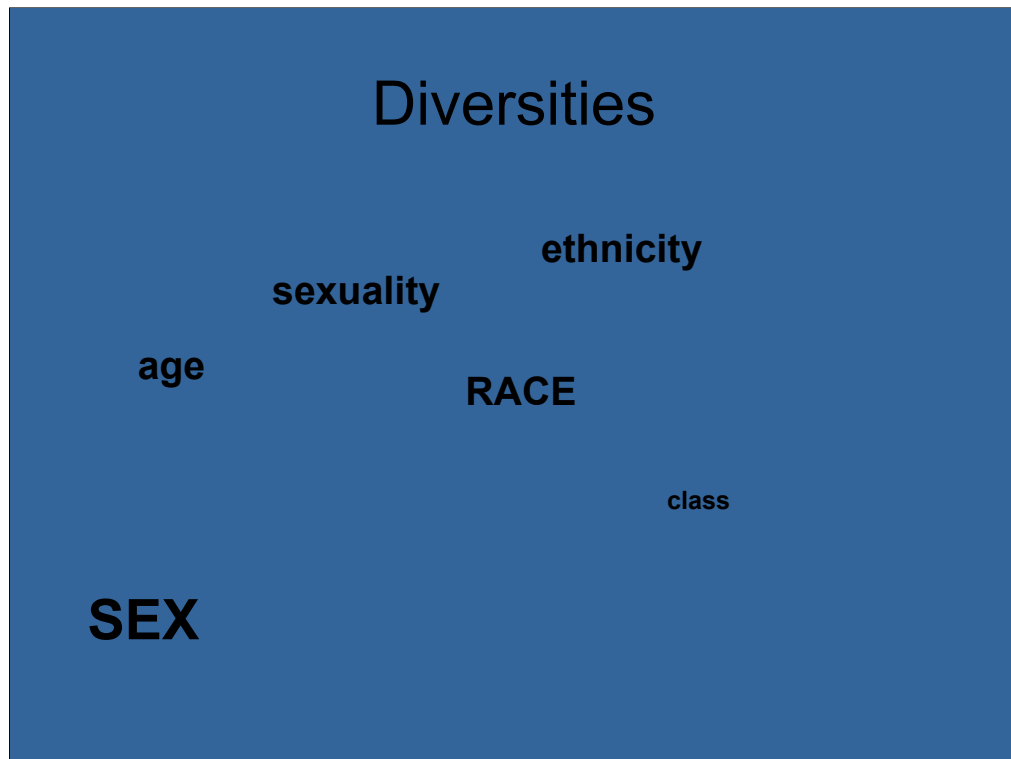
*science*

*money*

On Day 2, we heard some scary facts about the future that actually already exist in the present, like the patenting of DNA. Imagine all human and plant life owned and distributed by your favorite corporations? Is it shocking that the 100 wealthiest economies include 51 corporations and 49 governments? What does this mean for our women's rights work, our lives, the environment? What does it mean that the military industrial complex dominates the political choices made about investment in new technologies?

If we think about our work going forward as a chess game, as the movie we saw suggests, then our discussions need to move quickly from the question of how technology, science and money are controlled and used against our interests, to the question of how we go about expanding our engagement with them. The message is that women need to get over our stereotypical discomfort not only of science and technology, but also of money.

This Forum brought the prickly but ever-present issue of money more forcefully into our conversations by opening up a dialogue about "Where is the money for women's rights?" The future of women's rights demands that we change our relationship to money, acknowledging the costs of our work, demanding a bigger share of the resources, and placing money in the middle of our discussions about strategy, rather than quietly stuffed in the closet.

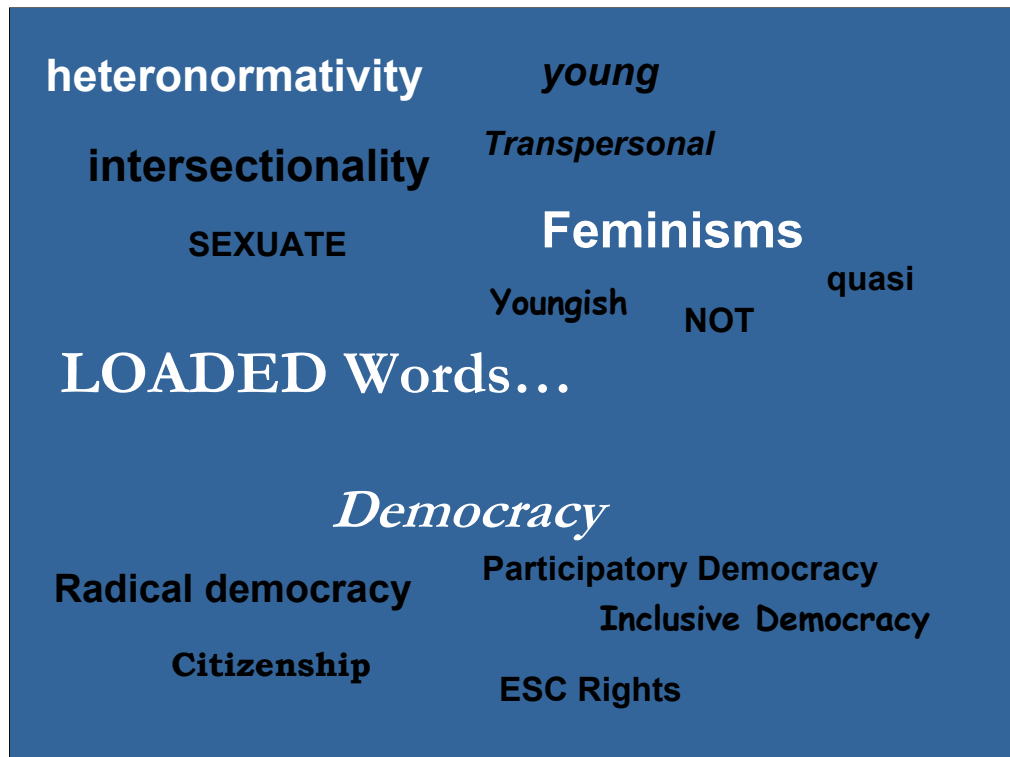


Compared to the Forum three years ago where there were important discussions about our diverse and multiple identities, it seemed that we went much further in the last 4 days to both unpack them and explore how to bridge our differences toward common ground.

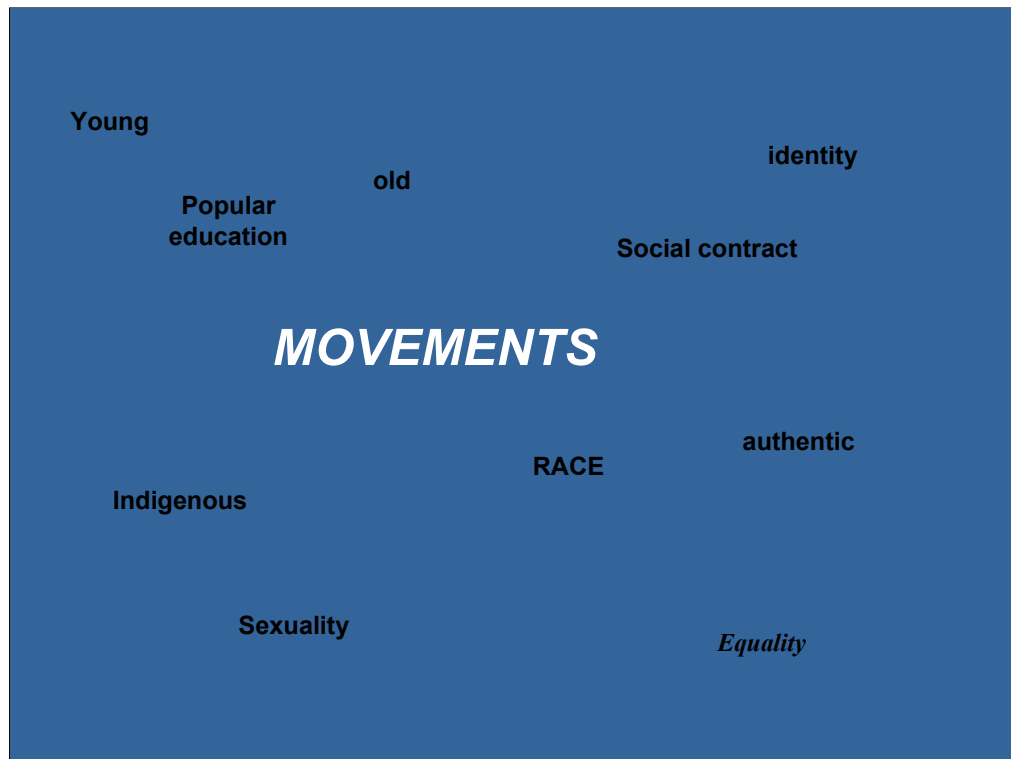
This Forum put sex and sexuality boldly in the center of our discussions. We heard and talked about how we are defined by it, how we define it and how we do it! Allowing the subject of pleasure and eroticism to creep onto the top of the table of our conversations with words like “heteronormativity” was stimulating and liberating to many, confusing to others and over-emphasized for some – reinforcing the very fact of our diversity.

Placing transgender issues at the center of the third plenary made a loud and unequivocal statement about sexuality as a fluid project and challenges us to continue thinking about the meaning of gender and the unending task of defining and claiming rights.

As far as the job of unpacking identity issues, age and race came up as perhaps a close second with sexuality in the Forum followed by class. Such is the challenge of multiplicities, although class remains one of our most complicated political challenges. We can get reassurance about the fact that identity is dynamic from Enisa’s Eminova from Macedonia: “I don’t want to be a full-time Roma smart-ass.”



How do we balance the need to better understand the inequalities shaping our lives with the need to better define our political projects to address them going forward? How do we communicate with one another across multiple differences while swimming in the many loaded words we use to describe our realities and perspectives? It seems that unpacking and negotiating the ever-contested meanings of our loaded words should become an increasingly central, even cherished, aspect of our strategizing and movement-building. For example, I heard in many conversations during this Forum the use of adjectives to qualify being a feminist: a quasi-feminist, a young or youngish feminist, not a feminist because .... and so on. We have to continue to be conscious that powerful words like “feminism”, like “heteronormativity” and even “intersectionality” can confuse, mystify and exclude as easily as they can open up new awareness, thinking and action. By embracing new words with open conversation and debate about their meaning and their relationship to our work, we may find common ground sooner than we think.



One of the most frequently used yet frequently confusing words in this Forum is “MOVEMENT.” Many of us often refer to “movement-building” and “women’s movements,” yet this vital word has multiple meanings amongst us. There seems to be little shared understanding about it. As most of us sit within our NGOs – looking at social movements from a distance, in the past, or coordinating with them periodically – we’re not exactly clear or at least on the same page about what women’s movements look like at this moment in history. What do we want our movements to look like and how do we build them? We would probably have different answers to these two questions, but it’s worth bringing this topic into the center of our conversations more forcefully. At the same time, this Forum has generated a lot of ideas and suggestions about movement-building although perhaps not explicitly.

# P O W E R

Many of the insights about movements and movement-building seem to stem from our implicit and explicit ideas about power. Along with our diversity, we share a profound desire to challenge and resist forms of power that dominate, exclude, and oppress. Building and transforming power is not just about naming and analyzing inequality – which continues to be an important and unfinished task – it's also about tapping into some of our old – maybe new to some – ways of thinking about alternative forms of power. Power within. Power to. Power with.

Many discussions, plenaries and even the entertainment managed to tell us something about power within, power to and power with – but it may help to distill and capture these insights for our work going forward from this Forum.

## ***Power within...***

multiple identities  
faith  
spirituality  
love  
anger  
sex  
sexual pleasure



What is power within? It is self-knowledge. The act of becoming aware and negotiating – with both pain and humor – our multiple identities within and against a backdrop of dominant power. Our sense of self within the dynamics of power that exclude us in one minute and create opportunities the next. Love of self as the basis of love of others and hope for change.

How do we nurture “power within” in our work? There are many examples from the Forum:

Creating safe spaces to share personal pain and joy.

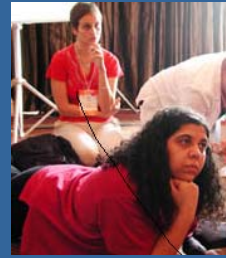
Confronting ourselves, getting angry, questioning our beliefs and those of others.

Finding and using information to open our thinking to fresh ideas and possibilities.

Telling personal stories, coming out, finding faith, embracing sexuality...

## Power to...

Say no, yes, maybe  
Let me speak for myself  
Be critical  
Seek and use new ideas  
Take action



What is “power to”? This is the concept of “agency”; the innate ability of every person to take action – any action – to make a difference. Even the simple act of saying “no” or “yes” embodies the “power to.”

What are some of the memorable examples of “power to” during this Forum? Curiously, the ones that stand out for me happened outside the sessions and plenaries. Marilyn Waring rocking to the Eurythmic’s hit, “Sweet Dreams,” and Primadonna’s performances on Day 3 sum up “power to” nicely for me. The mere act of wearing a pink slip like the activists in CodePink can make a difference, or putting a bag over your head, as a group of Forum participants did in the lobby to protest the latest “gag” rules from the Bush administration.

How do we nurture “power to” and weave this into our organizing, education, research and advocacy strategies to build movements? This Forum offers no formulas but some simple hints and suggestions can be captured.

Make being a feminist or being a women’s advocate fun.

Bring in music and dance to help people feel free.

Be inventive about the action.

Create opportunities for all kinds of knowledge to be shared.

Support bold acts.

Recognize and use silence as an action in itself.



## Power with...

Collective power of unity  
Respecting difference  
Finding common ground  
Relationships  
Trust  
Intersectionality  
Embracing conflict  
Organizing  
Winning together  
Choosing battles  
Shared values  
Resources



What is “power with”? It is the forms of collective power created by coming together around a common agenda while respecting differences. The power of our numbers, as feminists, women’s advocates and men who support feminism, is probably the greatest source of power we have and is the heart of movement-building.

How do we nurture and strengthen this kind of power? “Power with” seems to depend upon tapping into other forms of power, concretely the “power within” and “power to”. This happens when people recognize, respect and negotiate differences but continue to seek out connections – be it a common enemy or shared values and vision or both. Given our fast-paced lives, often fragmented efforts, and virtual communication, how do we create the space to build trust and the kinds of relationships we need to negotiate and survive the inevitable conflicts we face? “Power with” grows through conversations about common values and shared moments of joy or pain as much as it is fuelled by political analysis and information. It is nurtured by creative, collective action and by successes as well as defeats that produce new knowledge and test our path.

**Connect local strategies with global  
engagement**  
**Plan division of labor**  
**Be bold**  
**Think big**  
**Be radical**  
**Be outrageous**  
**Be outraged**  
**Be drunk with justice...and joy, humor,  
creativity**  
**Generate hope**

At this Forum, we heard lots of advice about the kinds of strategies that seem to generate power to, within and with at this particular historical moment. Many of us are trying new strategies or freshening up and refining old strategies with new twists and turns. Soap operas, popular videos, story telling, constructing a visual wall about women's economic lives, women on waves, protests and performances, new ideas about alternative economics, and more. We heard practical advice like:

- localize strategies while linking them and engaging globally
- clarify a division of labor in our work at all levels
- remember the resource of our collectivity

Above all we were invited to -- be radical, be outraged, be outrageous, think big and most of all, "be drunk with justice".

Thank you for inspiring me.