

# *Building Feminist Movements and Organizations: Global Perspectives*

Lydia Alpízar Durán, Noël D. Payne and Anahi Russo (eds),

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## **Elisabeth Porter**

The twenty six chapters in this book came in response to an open call from the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) for contributions on feminist organisational strengthening and movement building. It is interesting to note that the call resulted in one hundred and forty four contributions from forty two countries. Why did this call generate such an enthusiastic response? [1] Isn't the feminist movement sufficiently mature to be clear about its impact? Doesn't it know where it's going yet?

Lydia Alpízar Durán one of the authors suggests otherwise, that in addition to the challenges within internal organisations, external challenges include 'increasing forms of fundamentalism, unilateralism and militarism, the pervasive violence against women, rising poverty and exclusion' (p. 1). Hence, the impetus for the book came from AWID's Feminist Movements and Organizations Programme which sought to compile regional differences on 'feminist thinking, knowledge, experience, projects, cases, methodologies, publications and tools' (p. 2). AWID carried out an online survey in 2006 on 'Where is the Money for Women's Rights?' and found that 87 percent of the almost 1,000 women's and feminist organisations who responded had started within the last sixteen years and 40 percent of these within the previous six years (p. 3). This means there are many new organisations and the 'institutional memory' that accompanies a 'sense of belonging to a historical transformation process' is lost (p. 3).

Why there is such a growth of new organisations? I aver that funding, or more to the point lack of funding, is a critical explanation. The AWID 'Second Fundher Report on Financial Sustainability for Women's Movements' worldwide found that in 2005, 299 women's organisations, 30 percent of the sample in sub-Saharan Africa had budgets of less than \$US10,000. [2] Of the sample of 139 organisations in the Asia-Pacific region, 25 percent of the sample had budgets less than \$US10,000. AWID's data shows the majority of organisations are small, with two thirds of the sample having annual budgets of less than \$US50,000. The issue of where funding is

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coming from and the lack of sustainable funding is a crisis issue for women's groups. [3] It seems to me that the growth of many new organisations has come about, at least in part, as a response to ad hoc or solely project-based funding. When the funding ends the organisations struggle to keep active.

### Consensus-Building

What struck me in reading the different chapters was the overlap in themes with so many authors in their concern with feminist values and organisational practices of inclusive, participatory decision-making processes. None of this is surprising. However, few authors distinguish between what I see as an important qualifier, namely the relationship between the women's movement and feminism. While the book title is *Building Feminist Movements and Organisations*, some authors write about women's organisations without bringing out the political differences that feminism brings.

Is consensus-building still an important part of feminist processes? Pragmatically, it is not without drawbacks. For example, Yamini Mishra and Nalini Singh suggest that continual debates on correct processes, on 'being more feminist than thou' (p. 41) can be time-consuming and not always helpful. In writing on factions in ten feminist organisations in rural Canada, Leona English suggests that while consensus purports to create inclusive, safe spaces, in reality it 'is a fiction that works to produce a regime of truth: that good feminists decide things together and generate no conflict' (p. 89). She likens this to the flat pay structure which occurs in some feminist organisations on a false notion of equality which 'glosses over the differences in responsibilities' (p. 90) and provokes factions because of felt inequities.

Certainly in conflict societies, women's organisations seek to develop coalitions across radical difference of race, culture, ethnicity, clan, tribe and belief in order to seek common purposes. The intent is not to ignore differences – impossible in divided societies where differences frequently underlie root causes of conflict – but to seek consensus on common needs and aspirations that can allow otherwise fragmented groups to work together. [4] While consensus generally is worth building, voices of dissent need room for expression, without the critic being made to feel like s/he is not being a 'good feminist.' This is an important message. However, the advantage of consensus and why it is an important part of democratic

processes is that when participants make a consensual decision, they are more likely to defend and support it.

#### **Politicisation of Movement**

I have already suggested that the book would have benefited from a closer discussion of whether women's organisations are necessarily feminist and if so, why and if not, why not? It was thus pleasing to read Andrea D'Atri's account of the repoliticisation of the women's movement and feminism in Argentina by twenty to thirty five year-old workers and students who were protesting against capitalism and patriarchy. In bringing together women's rights and feminism, Adriana Medina Espino explains how SIPAM, a leading Mexican feminist organisation that defends women's sexual and reproductive health embodies activism, involvement, solidarity and tenacity needed for political commitment. Similarly, Jinnock Lee writes about the Korean Women's Trade Union as a women's and feminist political endeavour. Nicholas Piálek describes gender mainstreaming not only as a feminist project but also as a political one in that 'it is fundamentally about changing the values held by people' (p. 84). Change in many cultures is slow, as shown by Margalit Shilo on the Jewish Orthodox women's revolution in Israel.

#### **Power, Leadership and Empowerment**

The dominant theme in the book is the importance of women's leadership and empowerment. The role of women's power is an issue some feminists struggle with and use qualifiers like 'inner power' or Hannah Arendt's 'power to' act within transformative leadership (rather than 'power over'). Kelsey Rice and Ann Crews Melton in writing on dynamics in Christian feminist community describe the 'conscious decisions to level power-dynamics' (p. 44). Durán writes of how many older women leaders are reluctant to move out of key positions they have built their lives around. For many women, a whole lifestyle, friendship network and source of meaning lies in the work they do with other women and letting go of what little power they have can appear threatening.

How then do feminists understand empowerment? Nancy Guberman, Jennifer Beeman, Jocelyn Lamoureux, Danielle Fournier and Lise Gervais offer insight into links between empowerment and democracy based on their experience of ten different women's groups in Quebec. They offer a useful definition of empowerment as 'practices aimed at accompanying women in the development of their self-determination, and their capacity to make socio-political analyses and take control

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of their own lives' (pp. 67-8). While 'democracy entails participation in the decisions affecting one's life' (p. 71), they argue that democracy and empowerment should be 'mutually reinforcing' (p. 76). This understanding minimises the chance of abuses of power.

Semillas is Mexico's only women's fund. Emilienne de León, Amanda Mercedes Gigler, Lucero González and Margaret Schellenberg explain how 'Semillas defines empowerment as a process that begins when a woman becomes aware that she is the subject of human rights' (p. 100). A woman must then appropriate rights and then be able to 'transmit her understanding and knowledge of rights to other women, thus re-initiating the cycle of empowerment for the benefit of others' (p. 100). Semillas is empowering Mexican donors to participate in local philanthropy directed at improving Mexican women's social conditions, especially their human rights.

Women's rights as human rights are a critical aspect of empowerment. Pramada Menon explains the rationale to the emergence of a women's human rights organisation in India called 'Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA) a support organisation for community-based groups. She writes of wanting to have fun in her work, a much under-utilized tool in mobilising enthusiasm, and one I endorse as indispensable in breaking down barriers and in fostering enjoyable work contexts. Menon's motivation was 'to create networks for social changes... build leadership capacities...and empower individuals to defend their own rights' (p. 110). In empowering new leaders to tackle violence against women, sexual and reproductive rights, and social justice, new conversations and perspectives were needed. Menon defines leadership as 'equality that enables people to live their lives as they choose with dignity and with sensitivity to other people's choices and decisions' (p. 111).

### **Sustaining work in situations of conflict**

The section on sustaining work in conflict zones is illuminating. In writing about Columbia, Yusmidia Sulano stresses a participatory methodology directed at 'working from the bottom up, changing power relations, recognising different and diverse identities, prioritising common needs' and increasing the visibility of participants' contributions in formulating an Agenda of Women for Peace. (p. 183) For Palestinian women in the State of Israel, Trees Zbidat-Kosterman highlights the need to strengthen local women's organisational capacities. It is pertinent to

note how Dalia Sachs and Hannah Safran emphasise their activism in Israel ‘in both the feminist and the women’s peace movements’ (p. 201). This combination is so important. Peace and justice are connected; gender equality, gender justice and women’s rights are vital in realising concrete goals within a transitional justice that leads to a sustainable peace. [5] Titi Salaam’s chapter on Nigeria is strongly titled, ‘A Matter of Life or Death.’ She stresses how ‘justice and peace’ are key principles of feminist leadership that are required to address injustice and violence. The emphasis in the chapter is on promoting women’s human rights, equity and social justice.

In the Algerian women’s movement, Carolyn Brac de la Perrière writes of how older women complained about the absence of youth in organisations, yet youth sought greater delegation of tasks to them. Experience should bring wisdom and experienced feminists have a vital role to play in women’s movements. So too, young women leaders demonstrate crucial capabilities and new perspectives to be cultivated and mentored by those with more experience. [6] Women’s and feminist movements and organisations continue to flourish with strong, highly motivated activists. However, most organisations remain seriously under-resourced, so the struggle continues. What also continues are the creative ideas, innovative strategies and a deep commitment to effect radical change in the lives of women. I remain hopeful.

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### Notes

- [1] I reviewed an earlier collection of essays, produced under AWID’s Young Women and Leadership Programme and edited by Wilson, Sengupta & Evans in *Democratiya 5*, Summer 2006.

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[2] Kerr 2007 p. 26.

[3] van Beek and de Vries 2008.

[4] See Porter 2007.

[5] See Porter 2007.

[6] While generally it is older women who hold this experience, some early- and mid-career women have vast knowledge to pass on, and sensitive men can also potentially play important roles in mentoring women in leadership skills.