

# **Introduction to Women's Bodies, Gender Analysis, Feminist Politics at the *Fórum Social Mundial***

By Laura Roskos and Patricia Willis<sup>1</sup>

## **The Social Forum Phenomenon**

Long before there was any mainstream buzz about globalization, economists like Heidi Hartman, Nancy Folbre and Julie Matthaei alerted us to the worldwide feminization of poverty. Not long afterward, women from around the world pulled together to lobby that a general recommendation addressing violence against women to be added to the international convention on women's rights. Today, no one doubts that the negative effects of globalization hit women harder or that women are the obvious canaries in the mineshaft of a new world order. Yet women organized as women or as a movement to advance their own interests have not been the most visible constituency in the anti-globalization convergence as it has shown itself at transnational protests or at the celebratory World Social Forum.

The first World Social Forum was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January 2001 as a reaction to the World Economic Forum conducted each year in Davos, Switzerland by the world's corporate and governmental elites. The first WSF organizers were French and Brazilian men who were concerned about the catastrophic global economic situations facing the world's poor and marginalized. They attributed the rapid deterioration of these conditions to the hegemonic capitalistic practices of the world's 'haves' whose policies, they believe, have created more 'have nots' at alarming speed while rendering the world environmental state unlivable for many. This inaugural social forum gathered approximately 19,000 attendees and was considered such a success that a second was planned for the following year.

As more activists and organizers learned about this venue, which sought to facilitate progressive activism and strategizing, women, who had not been fully included, began to try to enter WSF spaces as attendees and as organizers. One organization, the World March of Women, which by 2001 had already had years of experience organizing women to participate in globally synchronized events, was present from the beginning. Through their persistence and investment of organizational resources of time and money into the WSF, the World March of Women did acquire some access to decision-making, organizing and some influence on, WSF policies. Their experience has been the exception rather than the rule, and representatives of the World March of Women still recognize problems with the lack of participation by women in numbers similar to men and, importantly, the intrusion of patriarchal attitudes and behaviors in WSF planning.

## **Where we enter**

The vision for this special issue on "Women's Bodies, Gender Analysis, and Feminist Politics at the Forum Social Mundial" emerged out of experiences that co-editors Pat Willis and Laura Roskos had during and after their involvement in organizing

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for the Boston Social Forum (BSF), an event held in July 2004. The BSF was the first social forum in the United States to be held under the auspices of the World Social Forum (WSF) and its guiding regulations, the Charter of Principles.<sup>2</sup> At the BSF, we and the other feminist organizers involved with the Women's Web, a "track" of 30 programs by and about women, had some disappointing interactions with the male organizers in charge of the overall event. Following months of intense but also occasionally euphoric organizing, these interactions generated a range of reactions in our colleagues and ourselves, ranging from surprise to outrage to dismay. Our decision to try to discover how other women/feminists had experienced and negotiated social fora around the globe was fueled by our need to create a deeper context for understanding these experiences and emotions.<sup>3</sup> In addition, as feminist activists, faced daily with decisions about where to put our time and energy, we wanted to know if the World Social Forum was worth the trouble engagement with it seemed inevitably to bring.

Later, in October of that same year, Pat attended the 3rd European Social Forum (ESF), which was held in London. There she found that many women, particularly grassroots women, expressed similar complaints and had parallel experiences in their organizing for the ESF 2004. Then, in January 2005 Pat went to the 5<sup>th</sup> World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil where she attended, amongst other panels and workshops by and about women, an introductory workshop for women WSF delegates. There, she witnessed the exasperation of every other woman under that tent to their marginalization in a multitude of ways at every World Social Forum they had attended since its inception in 2001. All of these women were long-time, proven feminist activists who related their social forum experiences with frustration and dismay, but also with determination for inclusion. All expressed their concern and their vehement dissatisfaction with the androcentric male WSF organizers who were very much stuck in patriarchal modes concerning gender hierarchies and social roles.

The moderator for this workshop was Carol Barton, at that time Coordinator for the Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice. Carol had been working for several years with other feminists globally to open up the WSF processes for women and agendas particularly important to women. Early in the workshop Pat asked Carol a question: "How feminist-friendly is the WSF?" Her answer hit home hard. Carol gave an acerbic laugh and answered flatly: "It's not."

This revelation, that the World Social Forum with all its lofty claims to inclusivity was recognized as a site of on-going and pervasive discriminatory practice against women by others, including by someone as seasoned as Carol, was profound for us. It helped us to validate and name our own experiences, and it made us curious about the extent and contours of this discrimination. This curiosity led us to ask other women to write about their social forum experiences. We believe their responses to this issue's Call

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<sup>2</sup> The WSF Charter of Principles can be found at <http://wsf2007.org/process/wsf-charter>

<sup>3</sup> The Women's Web was an ad hoc coalition of approximately 30 northeast-based feminist/women's organizations that came together for the BSF to organize a series of both collaborative and stand alone events at the BSF. Laura was a lead person in organizing the Women's Web and also its major event, The Tribunal on Violence Against Women. Our experiences with the BSF are analyzed in greater detail in our article, "Is Another World Possible When Violence Against Women is Ignored? Some Questions from the Boston Social Forum" in *Peace and Change*, forthcoming Fall 2007.

for Papers assembled in this special issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies*, while not exhaustive of all the acts of discrimination and marginalization experienced by women in the context of social forum organizing and implementation, does go a long way towards adding definition and precision to the feelings of unease and dissatisfaction, frustration and anger many women have encountered there.

### **What we observed**

At the Boston Social Forum in 2004, which was the first social forum that either Laura or Pat had attended or organized for, the main event of the Women's Web was a Tribunal on Violence Against Women. This tribunal was similar to other formal but unofficial peoples' tribunals held in many locations around the world since the mid twentieth century, gaining in popularity since the 1980's as a way for citizens to express their objections to war and other human rights abuses. Violence against Women was the chosen topic because Women's Web members and feminist theory see VAW as endemic to patriarchal culture, as the primary controlling mechanism that men/boys and patriarchal society use to maintain supremacy over women/girls, and as so increasingly pervasive that virtually no lives are left untouched by it in some way.

Amongst the complaints that Women's Web organizers expressed about the BSF organizational processes and the many organizing meetings they attended with BSF organizers, was that they felt like they were only "window dressing", that is, that they were there to be visible, but not to be heard from, in order to satisfy the shallow feminism of political correctness and to make the male organizers feel as though they were progressive on women's human rights. Women's Web organizers' interaction with the principle BSF organizers was often fraught with miscommunication and, what seemed to some, obstructionism. The evening after the Tribunal, Women's Web organizers and Tribunal participants discovered that the plenary space they thought they had been promised during BSF organizational meetings was taken away, and that there would be no platform available from which to articulate the tribunal's findings. One of the two principle BSF organizers told a Tribunal organizer that "violence against women was a white women's issue" and that spotlighting this issue during the final plenary session would be "divisive", "that it would blow the whole social forum apart". Either he had failed to notice that the advocate for the tribunal was herself a woman of color or he was employing a tactic meant to divide women by race and thus perpetuate their marginalization.

When Pat attended the European Social Forum 2004 in London she talked with several grassroots women organizers who claimed they had been cast aside by ESF planners when they wanted to organize a Women's Day similar to the one that had successfully preceded the 2003 ESF in Paris. During the Assembly of Social Movements, an event that occurs at the end of each social forum, these feminists stormed the stage. Their main complaint was that women were being "mainstreamed" in the social forum process and that this mainstreaming relegated some women and their issues into a void of invisibility, a familiar problem often encountered with gender mainstreaming. It appeared to Pat that the women who were part of the recognized social forum processes around the ESF 2004 were largely NGO and professional women and that the grassroots organizers who had few resources and no titles were sidelined. Was this an effect of women who had

in some sense “made it” becoming co-opted by the hierarchical power structure, a power structure that was chiefly composed of male, and perhaps a few androcentric women?

The social forum space has been difficult for women to enter in a number of ways and yet women persist. Hegemonic male behaviors and ways of organizing have predominated at principal social fora decision-making bodies but feminist activists seem determined to push for egalitarian ways of being at social fora, because, as the beautiful and oft-heard social forum mantra tells it, another world is possible, even for women. Through sustained and mindful, sometimes strategic, interventions, women continue to enlarge their experiences within the social forum spaces, in part, by connecting among themselves to form larger and larger working groups, committees, task forces, and teams and in part because they seek to engage men in their struggles around social issues that affect us all.

Now, several years later, Pat has just returned from the WSF VII held in Nairobi, Kenya and the editors find themselves in the midst of organizing for the first US Social Forum, which is planned for Atlanta at the end of June, 2007. Just as the Gender Equity Coalition, an alliance of several global feminist organizations that are organized as part of the Human Dignity Human Rights Caucus of the WSF, is gaining influence over the World Social Forum planning processes, the Women’s Working Group has elevated itself from caucus status to working group, which means that it has the same important leveraging that the other major organizing arms of the US Social Forum have.<sup>4</sup> The Women’s Working Group chose Loretta Ross, longtime feminist human rights activist, as its coordinator. Loretta had participated in the BSF Tribunal on Violence Against Women as one of the “cronos” who sat in judgment of women’s human rights abuses. The mission of the WWG is to ensure gender equity, parity, and that proper attention is given to “women’s issues at the USSF.

As a result of our experiences at the Boston Social Forum some Women’s Web organizers and participants began to feel that social fora were venues where women could not receive equal treatment to men. Some suggested that feminists should take their organizing efforts to women-only venues and leave off trying to organize with men, especially men who were little accustomed to operating in truly egalitarian fashion with women. Others felt we should continue to secure our footing in social fora venues and not isolate ourselves even in the face of sexist practice and belief. After months of wrestling with our ambivalent feelings about how to move forward, we decided that isolation was not the final answer and that struggle with patriarchy required full frontal attacks and engagement. This special issue of the *Journal of International Women’s Studies* has emerged as one of our efforts in this continuing struggle.

### **Thematic overview of contents**

That the WSF looms in the feminist imagination as inextricably linked to the World Conferences on Women held under the auspices of the United Nations cannot be denied. Two of our contributors attempt to define the nature of this link: Amanda Gouws sees it as a succession—i.e., the World Conference on Women generated collective

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<sup>4</sup> The Gender Equity Coalition of the Human Dignity, Human Rights Caucus officially proposed to the HDHRC at their final plenary on January 24th that gender equity and gender parity on all WSF organizing committees and within all WSF processes be made a priority of the HDHRC.

learnings that are of service to women participating in the WSF—while Barbara Klugman describes them as simultaneous strands of activism offering the opportunity for different sorts of interventions and access. However, in each case, what comes to mind is less the official UN conferences, per se, where national delegations gathered, than the NGO forums held in conjunction with the official gatherings. These forums became famous for producing “aha” moments, moments in which the subject suddenly feels herself part of a greater whole, a global women’s movement. The WSF was envisioned as a space in which a global social movement could ferment through processes of interaction, in essence accelerating the process, producing a multitude of “aha” moments among new and returning, female and male, participants at annual intervals. However, as contributor Magdalena Freudenschuss explains, “With the first World Social Forum (WSF), the ‘anti-globalisation’ movement found a point of rotation but not necessarily a center. Its identity is based on the opposition to neoliberalism, but not on a shared utopia.”

In some ways, the World Conferences on Women had in common an underlying dynamic that was the inverse of what Freudenschuss describes. For many US-ians, participation at the NGO Forum in Hairou came as the culmination of months of on-the-ground local organizing to harmonize the forward-looking agendas of disparate women’s organizations. In some cases, this process came complete with local fundraising for travel funds and “scholarships” given to representatives selected on locally-determined grounds. Selection as a representative in this fashion almost always carried with it the responsibility to report back to one’s home community in public and private forums. In her first contribution to this volume, Janet Conway argues that if there is a muted or yet to be acknowledged center to the WSF, it is this positive “politics and ethics” of a transformational, transnational feminist movement.

Renee Kasinsky’s description of the geographically rather than ideologically based Boston delegation with which she traveled to the WSF VI in Caracas, Venezuela seems to be the exception rather than the rule. More often, individuals enter the WSF through their affiliations with a participating political or cultural group, or as a socially progressive “tourist”. Because participation in the WSF is seldom linked to any concerted local organizing efforts, most attendees have returned home unclear as to how they might apply their new knowledge in their home communities, beyond simply publicizing the existence and nature of the WSF. However, as linkages among individuals and among organizations multiply this may be changing, producing new strategies and pathways for applying social forum learnings on the ground.

Ara Wilson points out in her article that it may be only women at the WSF who map the Forums in relation to UN conferences, and that men typically use other points of historical and geographical reference. While UN-ese and international legal language emanating from United Nations documents such as Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security certainly find a place at the WSF, these discourses are by no means universal or uncontested. In particular, as Aurelie Latoures points out, the administrative technique of “gender mainstreaming,” often associated with UN and World Bank-run development programs, has been sharply criticized by women activists from the Two Thirds World, who have direct experience as “beneficiaries” of these programs. On the other hand, while the UN is frequently criticized for being what contributor Amanda Gouws refers to as a “talk shop”, The WSF as it evolves is leaving behind a textual trail of principles and statements ripe with the hermeneutic possibilities

similar to those embedded in UN documents. Despite a show of global unity and collaboration in the February 15, 2003 worldwide anti-war demos, it remains unclear when in the future the WSF might make its energies visible as action again.

Despite its hesitancy to formulate an action agenda, neither the WSF guiding organs nor its participants typically describe the WSF as a “talk shop”. The metaphors more typically invoked are those of “space” and “process”. But what emerges from the essays collected here is a portrait of a process constrained by the limitations of space, or as Magdalena Freudenschuss suggests, a laboratory. In Pat’s interview with Onyango Oloo, National Coordinator for the Kenyan Social Forum in 2006 and a member of the WSF Nairobi 2007 Central Organizing Committee, he comments on the recurring feminist complaint that men simply “take up too much space”. Thus, as Amanda Gouws and Ara Wilson demonstrate, in order to achieve some sort of parity, women have had to create new spaces either adjunct to or embedded within the social forum’s official structure, such as, respectively the Women’s Day held before the ESF Paris and the Feminist Dialogues preceding all of the forums since 2004 when they were first organized in Mumbai by South Asian and South American feminists, the Diversity Boat at Porto Alegre 2005, and the Women’s World at the WSF VI Bamako, Mali. This last event, and its effects on the programming of the Bamako Forum in its entirety, is analyzed in depth by Aurelie Latoures.

As it turns out, space is not infinite nor is it an abstraction. Rather it is a commodity continually in short supply. For Social Forum organizing committees, space is expensive and social forum programming committees are always grappling up until the very last minute with the challenge of trying to accommodate too many proposed activities within the available venues and time slots. Hence, as Susan Hawthorne relates, “the hierarchies distained philosophically manifest themselves in the ranking of spaces based on proximity, visibility and accessibility—not to mention size and acoustics.”

Our politics are always embodied as Barbara Sutton reminds us in her reading of the naked body as a political resource. The experiences of our bodies shape our political commitments; our bodies need to transport themselves to the Social Forum and once there, need the means of sustenance and a place to sleep. If women have not been able to find a secure place to rest at the Social Forum, as Onyango Oloo has suggested in his article, “Gendering WSF Nairobi 2007 - Conceptual underpinnings”, if women have not been safe from sexual harassment and assault at the social forum as the rumors of rape analyzed by Sara Koopman here would suggest, then how can feminist politics get a firm foothold? And what kind of a foothold would feminist politics need to re-establish a global women’s movement, this time with equal participation by both women and men? While the WSF founding documents seem to aspire to gender neutrality, the requirements of a women friendly space or movement seem to be not even on the screen.

Women’s bodies are everywhere in this volume, yet the process of putting it together proved strangely disembodied. While the editors do ongoing political work together in the context of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, with one exception, we have never met our contributors. We do not know their racial or class positions, their sexualities or politics, their public stance or actions beyond what they have chosen to disclose in their articles or in the correspondence with us. More importantly perhaps, while we are both veterans of the WSF, we have never observed any of these women in that context and so are unable to judge what personal or

institutional power they wield in that arena. This is particularly weird because questions of power and its mobilization are at the heart of each contribution to this issue.

While the absence of embodied encounters among those of us implicated in this project seems weird on one level, it also mirrors what may be the typical experience of planning a social forum event. Much of the organizing for the social forum involves on-line communication with strangers simultaneous with a personal investment of hundreds if not thousands of dollars travel arrangements, all in the hopes that when you do meet up you'll be able to successfully work together in a stressful and chaotic environment. The Social Forum's ability to orchestrate this specific sort of encounter, time and time again among multiple sets of individuals, may be one of its most unacknowledged but valuable movement building assets.

Because social forum planning often brings together individuals unknown to each other in lived experience, these encounters allow for the possibility of foregrounding aspects of our identities within the arena of the social forum that might otherwise remain muted or dormant. Although outreach materials for the forums typically address well established identity groups (indigenous, youth, women, etc.) and are circulated through organizational networks, forums imagine themselves as transformative spaces. The tension between identity and transformational politics is most visible in this volume when one reads the contributions by Barbara Klugman and Susan Hawthorne side-by-side. While WSF seems have motivated greater attentiveness to and changes in how various concerns are framed, and sparked new alliances among organizations and organized groups, it is harder to assess what the effects have been on individual subjects and personal loyalties.

While our CFP specifically asked for essays addressing bodies, politics, and analysis, it is nevertheless notable that not one of the contributions in this volume asks or provides information about how the WSF, from venue rentals to airplane tickets, is financed. Yet, political analysis mandates that we follow the money, something women activists are notoriously short of and might well subject to more scrutiny. In this volume, Nicole Doerr addresses the problem of accessing travel funds for European "women without" and Janet Conway questions the apparent lack of interest in addressing conditions of poverty at the Feminist Dialogues preceding this year's WSF in Nairobi. Yet the reader of this volume might easily forget that Social Forums are enormously costly events for delegates and the social forum itself.<sup>5</sup> In addition to direct cash outlays there are resources of all kinds given in-kind by host governments—such as the free subway passes, which as Renee Kasinsky reports, were given to all registered participants in the WSF Venezuela 2006 and which presumably do have to be accounted for somewhere along the line.

When we first began soliciting commentary from other women attendees (long before proposing this special issue), we received a fair amount of correspondence

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<sup>5</sup> According to information posted on the World Social Forum official website, the debt incurred by the WSF V was R\$2,829,835.47. Continued fundraising had reduced this amount to R\$ R\$563.030,00 by the end of May, 2006. [http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/noticias\\_01.php?cd\\_news=2170&cd\\_language=2](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/noticias_01.php?cd_news=2170&cd_language=2) (accessed 3/2/07). In addition to the national, state, and local government, the Bank of Brasil and two Brazilian petroleum companies are listed among the forum's official sponsors and supporters. A list of supporters can be found at [http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic.php?pagina=apoiadores\\_2005\\_ing](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic.php?pagina=apoiadores_2005_ing) (accessed 3/2/07).

complaining about the “invisible hand” of big labor in shaping the WSF. Oddly, none of this discourse shows up in the more academic articles prepared for publication here. On the other side of the coin, while several of our contributors, most notably Amanda Gouws, discuss the Feminist Dialogues Porto Alegre 2005, no one discusses the source of the funds to support these gatherings. Yet, because funds, like spaces, are finite, the lack of transparency around WSF resource management has generated hard feelings and animosity. Furthermore, unless the total scope of investment represented by the WSF is acknowledged, it seems to us impossible to actually answer the question of whether the forums are worth engaging in. The bottom line is: if the money trail remains obscured or denied, then there are important things about the WSF’s purpose and outcomes that we cannot know.

In her essay, “Transnational Feminisms and the World Social Forum: Encounters and Transformations in Anti-globalization Spaces,” Janet Conway suggests that civil society organizations will be better served by clarifying their goals and the extent of their commitment to WSF early on. Her description of the World March of Women makes it clear that such clarity was foundational to the success and sustainability of World March of Women’s presence, as well as the WMW’s ability to be an influential ally for other women and women’s organizations trying to enter the process. Attendance at global conferences of any sort is an expensive proposition both in terms of logistics and actual cash outlay. Even if one were to pitch a tent at the youth camp, travel in this world is not free, nor freely available, particularly to those encumbered with care taking responsibilities for crops or other humans.

The WSF has attempted to address this issue through decentralization, holding polycentric forums simultaneously in various locations in 2006, will do so again in 2008, and localization in fostering the staging of social forums at the regional, national, and municipal levels. In the context of all of the struggles over venues and voice at the WSF, it is interesting that the word used most in WSF circles is “articulate”, the same word that several contributors choose for describing the harmonization of agendas among organizations working through the WSF process. For example, in describing the rationale for siting one of the 2006 Forums in Bamako, Mali Aurelie Latoures writes, “With the increasing number of national, local and regional forums, there was also an increasing demand for Africa and Asia to be articulated into the global process.” Yet the replication of forums at multiple levels of social organization potentially means the multiplication of financial and other resources required, not just by the central organizing committees of these fora, but by every organization seeking to be represented or to participate there. Depending on how the problems of funding and access are handled, social forums may risk becoming an unceasing round of increasing spectacular carnivals for a certain “radical” social set.

In closing, we would like to thank the contributors to this volume. Alone, in the context of their organizational bases, and collectively in various collaborative formats including this special issue, our contributors are imagining strategies and pathways out of the patriarchal morass that had leapt from androcentric cultures right into the World Social Forum, a seemingly new phenomenon of progressive activism which promised egalitarian theory and practice but which re-inscribed patriarchal oppression of women from its very beginnings. Perhaps the writings in this issue will help create social forums

that are more feminist friendly, and thus hasten the realization of that other world which globalization's discontents are steadily building. With guarded optimism, we now open this volume to public view, with hopes that its readers find engaging with these articles as rewarding as we have.