
DRAFT CRITERIA FOR A PROPOSED WOMEN'S SUMMIT ABOUT THE STATE OF THE WORLD

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At the opening session of the Association of Women in Development (AWID) conference, 'Reinventing Globalisation', in October 2002, a personal statement by Joanna Kerr was circulated as a backgrounder. She wrote that she thought there should not be a Fifth World Conference on Women in the year 2005. She argued that in every UN conference since 1995, women had to place a great deal of effort and resources just to defend the gains made in previous UN conferences against right wing governments going to the conferences precisely to *backtrack* the gains made by women.

The statement sent a combination of applause and shockwaves throughout the room where 1,200 participants were listening to her. My assessment of the reactions? Perhaps excitement about the fact that we were hearing a daring, challenging, critical and autonomous thought being launched openly from a young woman in a leadership role in a significant global women's organisation — AWID. At least that was my reaction, mainly because it was a provoking debate. But the statement was only the beginning of a debate that hopefully takes us away from the 'all or nothing' approach of the past years in preparations for UN conferences.

Other reactions were less positive. Perhaps due to the fear of losing even more ground in the UN if we become 'confrontational' about UN proposals in the Beijing Platform itself. Or fear of losing the place we have won in the UN process and as NGOs, which have developed around and within the UN lobby. They have already placed efforts in the '+ 10' process. That 'place' needs to be evaluated but maybe the players felt there was an assessment without debate or evaluation.

Concern might also have been based on another reaction. Some women felt that the proposal was questioning the value of the UN itself for women's advancement. And, beyond this, challenging a future UN conference on women. Feminist International Radio Endeavour (FIRE) interviewed Joanna Kerr just after her statement. This idea had not even crossed her mind. Instead, she was speaking about postponement until better global conditions for women were in place. She also meant that the responsibility should lie with governments, so much so that she said the Vatican should be out of the UN decision-making process before another Women's Conference.

Another woman — who asked to remain anonymous — told me that she thought we should talk about women boycotting the UN. While she did not really believe it, but felt the stagnation of the global women's movement has in part to do with the fact that it cannot even think beyond a UN and its institutions. And, all this while they are being eroded into a terrible unilateralism (or what I have called a multilateral unilateralism !) She wanted a shock treatment for the movement so as to make us move beyond the present paralysis of analysis and change in the present context. I was sad that she wanted to remain anonymous — because she felt no one in the movement would talk to her or invite her to events after such a statement and no funding agency would ever fund her again.

Sad, sad, sad that the approach to the politics of “You are either with me or against me” has occupied a place in the subjectivity of some women leaders (and maybe also in the dynamics of our movement). We need to revisit the way we have debated and have not debated within the movement, in order to challenge ourselves to face the new context.

The workshop on ‘Power and Negotiations’ raised the issue of stating, recognising and making explicit, the powers (and the pains inflicted by lack of negotiations that includes explicating power, fear and competition) among women.

Workshop : ‘The Big Debate : Have the UN Conferences Benefited Women ?’

The five women who spoke in this workshop did a good job of assessing the gains women have made in two of the UN conferences — the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing.¹

However, their analyses seemed to have been frozen in Beijing seven years ago. No one addressed what happened either at the UN World Conference against Racism or the recent World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa. Without these two conferences — the ones that took place in the new context — it is impossible to assess the status of our gains today. A participant from the floor said the analysis had been too self-complacent, and gave the following example :

The paradigm shift about reproductive rights in the Cairo Conference on ‘Population and Development’ in 1994...how can it be considered a gain now, when neoliberalism is dismantling state-provided basic health services ? Where are women going to get those rights met ?

Proposal for a Women's Conference about the State of the World : Some Preliminary Criteria

First of all, I must clarify that although I presented the proposal for a women's conference about the state of the world, the original idea is not mine. It was proposed to FIRE in the last international broadcast during the Fourth World Conference on Women. A woman said, “Now that the UN and Member States have successfully organised a World Conference about Women, the global women's movement should consider organising a Women's Conference about the State of the World”.

I remember commenting to my colleagues at FIRE that the day would come, sooner rather than later, when the conditions would be ripe for such a proposal to gain ground. That moment when it was first stated was not its time. Women were celebrating

the results of the Beijing Platform for Action. Many of us felt we had to put much of our energy into keeping what we had gained rather than moving forward. But we were still able to move the agenda forward on some issues, so there was much to celebrate. But the changing 'correlation of power' among UN Member States and other actors was not as clear-cut then, although the tendency was there. I raised some of this in the position paper I presented at one of the main plenaries of the NGO Forum.²

In the paper, I took the audience through a guided political tour of every UN Conference from the 1992 Earth Summit to the Social Development Summit in 1995. I pointed out how in each of them emerged, what I called, the 'invisible powers' that govern the world and the UN, but appear outside of the decision-making at the UN. These 'invisible powers' include transnational corporations, the 'new' military, the IMF and World Bank, the drug Mafia, fundamentalist religions, etc.

Today, seven years later, most of those powers are actually very visible in decision-making and have gained tremendous ground so as not to have to do things invisibly. And yet, we women, who finally have gained visibility in the global agenda of the UN *have* in those same seven years, become transparent. We are in the documents and policies, but in the actions, the mandates of the 'no longer invisible powers' are able to get most actors to go through women as if we are not even there.

In this context, we women urgently need a space to call home — *ours*, *LA NUESTRA* — where we can :

- Assess the huge changes that have taken place in the past years.
- Evaluate and take stock of what we have accomplished and have not accomplished in that context.
- Assess how we have done what we have done — strategies of action, negotiation, agenda setting and power building (personally, organisationally and socio-politically).
- Look at the gains and the costs (personal and organisationally) of the way we have done things, and
- Develop proposals about the changes we have to make as a movement in order to be more effective in the new context.

At the AWID workshop where I first made this proposal I had one minute to present what I had written in five pages, so here it is :

First, I want to outline what my *idea* is *not about*, so as to clear the air from the 'all or nothing' or the 'with me or against me' approach. (This is therefore an open proposal, for debate and enrichment.)

- It must not be a Conference against the UN or its conferences. It should assess the current status of the UN today in order to look for ways to contribute more effectively to affirm the principles, objectives and programmes for which it stands. It should seek ways to defend, promote, protect and implement what women have gained in it, and the equal footing that women have to gain in its decision-making process and places. But it should address other issues and spaces beyond the United Nations.

- It will not be an NGO Forum for Beijing + 10 exclusively. It will assess the gains of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the Platform for Action, and the Platform itself will be assessed in today's context, not of the past alone. Even if it happens before, parallel to or after a 10-year UN assessment about the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, it will be independent of the proposal of a Women's Summit about the State of the World. A debate about the five-year assessment by Member States is still pending. Finland is the only government that has said yes to it and we have not heard from others.
- A Women's Summit about the State of the World will not even be a conference by women in NGOs or other types of civil society organisations. Convened and organised by the women's movement, it will invite women in governments, specialised agencies and states that want to take part in a women's space that will set the agenda and proceedings in women's own terms, regardless of the place they occupy professionally.
- It must not only be an event but also a whole process leading up to it. This includes preparation at the personal, local, national, regional and international levels in order to assess but mainly to contribute, to rebuild the empowerment movement that is so un-articulated at those levels also, and also name the paradigm shifts we need in the world.
- I hope it will debate and construct new paradigms be they based on the 'commons' or the 'gift economy' or whatever women call the paradigm of the planetary world we need to build as a reference point for the transformation we want and that humanity desperately needs. During the last few years I have learnt that the big achievement of neoliberal globalisation is that it has convinced almost everyone that the world as it dominantly moves today is the only world possible. Therefore when we all speak about the changes we want but do not raise alternative paradigms, most people think we want them in the context of this model ! The WSF has used the slogan : "Another World Is Possible !" But if women do not contribute to the definition of what that New World is for us, other actors will do it 'for' us and I doubt it will include women as main players on an equal footing. We need to *define* that world, not only enjoy it, or we will suffer the consequences.
- It will not be a consultation process organised by the same global networks that we have had in the past or have currently. Their place in the organising of the Summit should be redefined and other women's social organisations should also be at the table.

Some Steps

- One of the first steps is to recover our dynamics and negotiations as a movement — how we want them to be and the collective that should convene it.
- A collectively drafted and agreed code of ethics about power sharing, accountability to others, and resource allocation in the process might be the

second step.

- A third step will be a recollection of ideas about the rest of the process at all levels.
- And a fourth step is how to fund it. Perhaps we have to re-think our strategies in this sense also.

For example, the WSF combines three proportional parts :

- local contribution by the citizens and municipality or central government of the country in which it is held;
- individual contributions by all in terms of voluntary work in the preparations and process and also those making good NGO salaries or professional salaries will commit to save money to pay our air fares and will even help another woman without a salary to get to the conference;
- funding from development co-operation agencies and philanthropists who are committed to global movement building.

The rest of the steps should be drafted in the process...

These are just a few ideas that hopefully will be debated and improved and stimulate us to think globally and autonomously in new ways. Also, to recover our faith in ourselves collectively as political actors for our human rights and the human rights of all in the new grim context that threatens even the very existence of the human race in this planet and our humanity as such.

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NOTES

¹ See sound files posted on FIRE at www.fire.or.cr.

² See 'Looking at the World Through Women's Eyes', by the NGO Forum conveners.