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Feminist Futures: building collective power for rights and justice

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50.50 Open Democracy

In times of unprecedented repression and violence, AWID's [upcoming International Forum](#) aims to transform diverse sites of activism into a powerful interconnected web of new alliances.

"There is no such a thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives." Audre Lorde's immortal and lately often re-emerging quote epitomizes the entire premise of the [13th International AWID 2016 Forum - Feminist Futures: Building Collective Power for Rights and Justice](#) that convenes in Bahia, Brazil, 8 - 11 September. The interconnectedness of today's world and alarming global trends are urging rights and justice movements to rethink our responses, move beyond our customary silos of issues, sectors, locations and identities, and create powerful new alliances with interlaced agendas.

The Zika virus and the response in Brazil exemplifies the importance of engaging multiple sectors and movements to provide an intersectional approach, and for collective action that serves all oppressed people. What is so multidimensional about the Zika virus? The patriarchal policy response and thrust to control women's bodies became immediately evident. Some activists rallied to highlight the reproductive rights of women infected with the virus and the devastating and [discriminating abortion laws](#) in the majority of affected countries. Similarly, activists also raised alarm at the lack of a rights-based approach towards children [born with disabilities](#) related to Zika. Further, the disproportionate effects of the virus on Black and poor communities had to be taken into consideration and necessitated a racial and economic lens in developing response strategies and action. Only by having an intersectional approach to an issue, and engagement of multiple movements working within all dimensions, can a comprehensive feminist response work. The [2016 AWID Forum](#) is a space where the ideas and experiences of diverse voices and movements will converge to examine the lessons of the past, conjure fresh perspectives, and move us beyond our silos to build collective power.

The current context

The increasingly [complex and polarized political landscape in the Forum's host country, Brazil](#), mirrors global trends that many of us are experiencing in different parts of the world.

Widespread growth of fascism, xenophobia, and nationalism is undermining democratic processes and institutions. Fundamentalist actors are using justifications of religion, tradition, culture and sovereignty in an attempt to annihilate diverse identities and enforce gendered patriarchal norms. These

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actors have ascended in the religious, political and economic power structures within countries. In multilateral processes at regional and global levels as well, fundamentalists and their supporters have been successfully advancing their agendas, reviving arguments based on cultural relativism, [undermining existing human rights agreements](#) as well as basic civil and political rights, with particular impact on women's human rights and the rights of the oppressed.

The dominant economic paradigm, grounded in market-based development, privatization and liberalization, has entrenched labour exploitation and inequalities across and within States. There are those who persist in asserting that economic growth, facilitated by giving free reign to corporations and business, can sustain a tide that will (eventually) raise all boats. However, it is unmistakable that policies of privatisation and liberalisation - the hallmark of the neoliberal model driving the global economy, the financial system, and aid and development policies over the past three decades - have sustained a trajectory of deepening inequalities, and environmental destruction that the world cannot ignore any longer.

Land and natural resource grabs are having devastating effects on the lives of Black and Indigenous, peasant, rural and impoverished peoples and the protection of the Earth. The exploitation of resources by corporate interests and the commodification and corporatization of our food systems and the commons is creating a massive crisis of people and planet that is also clearly exacerbated by the impacts of climate change.

Corporate interests have also significantly influenced the role the state has played in protecting human rights and women's human rights. Similarly, the United Nations continues to be important in building international consensus on development, rights and justice, as with the Sustainable Development Goals, but remains weak in holding states accountable to their commitments and obligations. With the corporate sector increasingly financing development and the United Nations itself, it remains to be seen whether global governance can be independent from its patrons.

Reasserting rights and justice - cross-movements

Against the backdrop of this context, peoples' claims and aspirations for justice, equality, freedom and rights are not new. Such claims have spurred resistance to dictatorship, colonialism and enslavement, and sparked subversion to patriarchy and systems of class and caste exploitation, long before they were enshrined in legal doctrines such as the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR).

Over the past fifty years, feminist and other progressive social movements have expanded the breadth and depth of formally recognized rights to address the claims of people facing particular forms of oppression. The rallying demand of "[women's rights are human rights](#)" ensured that the 1990s became a turning point for both women's rights movements and for the

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human rights framework, and centered the obligation for every society to protect, fulfill and promote the rights of women in their diversities.

These feminist frameworks have been enriched by other movements, including, the trans*, intersex and gender non-conforming activists who have pushed feminism beyond binary notions of gender and gender oppression, and the Black, Indigenous and Dalit struggles which pushed feminist movements to go beyond single-issue struggles to recognize the intersections of race, ethnicity, class and caste privileges.

Women's rights activists and diverse social movements from different regions continue to assume leading roles in the struggles to defend their territories, communities and rights, articulating the systemic and intersectional nature of the challenges we face, and making better connections with the agendas of other movements for alliance building and collective responses.

In the last decade alone, new narratives of freedom and liberation have been written through a cross-movement lens of organizing. For example, with organizing around climate change and environmental destruction, we are seeing greater visibility of diverse movements coming together to push for change from policy spaces to the streets. Women's rights and feminist movements' engagement in these issues are being increasingly recognised - in particular, the strengthening alliances between Black, Indigenous, and grassroots movements building common platforms and including gender, race, and class analysis in demands on climate change. In addition, we are seeing greater transnational solidarity between, for example, #BlackLivesMatter and other struggles - from Ferguson to Palestine and Brazil, plus Dalit struggles and Indigenous actions.

However, attacks on civil society activists, organisations and movements are growing and the list of countries with [shrinking spaces](#) for social, economic and environmental justice work is getting longer. These crackdowns manifest not only as censorship, surveillance and restricted access to funding, but in the rewriting of civil and criminal laws and financial regulations to prevent social justice activists and organisations from doing their work. In many instances, these actions are also being justified by 'national security' concerns. This is an alarming trend, occurring in diverse locations including Egypt, Hungary, Russia, Sudan, Sri Lanka, Canada, Mexico and Brazil.

Crises of democratic institutions seem to be pushing activists toward smaller scale experimentation with what is possible. Feeling excluded from mainstream systems and so-called democratic processes, there is an increasing diversification in models of organising, a more atomised and localised building of alternatives of "something different." The silo-ization of struggles has fragmented social movements, but in an increasingly connected world, the potential for collective action across diverse forms of organizing has dramatically grown. Rights and justice activists are working across issues and movements to advance shared agendas, and it is these examples of diverse coalitions that we aim to strengthen and multiply.

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At this historic moment, we have a shared responsibility to disrupt and transform current power structures to advance rights and justice. The [AWID 2016 Forum](#) is about moving beyond our silos of issues, sectors, locations and identities with the understanding that none of us are free, until all of us are free. Over 1800 activists from every corner of the world will bring their deepest challenges, best thinking, highest hopes and most innovative strategies to collectively create new futures. Another world is indeed possible, and our movements are bringing it to life.

This article is based on the collective writing of the AWID team addressing different themes at the AWID Forum [Feminist Futures: Building Collective Power for Rights and Justice](#) 8-11 September, Bahia, Brazil. openDemocracy 50.50 writers will be [reporting daily](#) from the Forum.