

Reflections on the WIDE Annual Conference

By Wendy Harcourt, WIDE Chair

Introduction

In this short paper I reflect on the vision, analysis, courage and strategies that women from around 36 countries shared at the 2006 WIDE Annual Conference on 'What State are we in: women's lives, changing states, expanding markets' in Warsaw, the first WIDE Annual Conference to be held in Eastern Europe.

Setting the scene

As Genoveva Tisheva from Bulgaria stated in the final press release, the conference was a turning point for WIDE as we embrace fully the strategy of working in an East-West-South dialogue. The conference brought together women from the East, West and South to discuss how to shape a new alternative feminist agenda linking changing states, changing markets and women's agency. In the process the conference was an important building block in WIDE's 'herstory'. The conference expanded WIDE's analysis and network by linking different social, cultural and economic facets of women's lives, East, West and South, in a search for alternatives built on both diversities and strategic common ground.

The differences in our herstories facing neo-liberalism and globalisation in Europe were fascinating, as were the important connections European women made with women from the South. The Polish press were keen to hear the experiences of southern women, their stories and their perceptions of changes here in Europe and globally. The first feminist herstory walk of Warsaw conducted by a group of young feminist women at the end of the first day of the conference was one highlight.

Outcomes

Overall, despite the difficult issues being tackled of gender inequality, fundamentalism of all kinds, the feminisation of poverty in Europe and elsewhere, unemployment, violence, migration, trade inequities and the overwhelming injustice of neo-liberal markets, the sense of determination to act was far stronger than the sense of a 'halted march'.

The programme afforded time for strategic action nationally, regionally and internationally on gender and trade agreements, EU policy, new aid modalities, economic alternatives, UN reforms and how to cope with shifting funding climates. Individually and collectively there were agreements made to continue working together analytically and politically.

As we spoke of our vision for a more gender-just world, economically, politically and socially, the conference went beyond mainstream confines and analytical boundaries to understand the connections and inter-sectionalities that shape market forces and the state. The discussions were fully cognisant of today's rapid globalisation and deepening inequalities but also of people's and women's increasing resistance and mobilization. We found not only commonalities, but also contradictions, differences and diversities.

Continuities for WIDE's strategic agenda

The 2006 Annual Conference closely followed the ground covered in the 20th Anniversary Conference held in London June 2005. The inter-linkages among the factors determining women's access and rights to political decision making, economic autonomy, a healthy environment and sound sexual and reproductive health are all closely linked to the geopolitical power relations the current militarism and neo-liberal trade agendas, undermining human security and sustainable development. What the conference in Warsaw showed is that these complex realities are pushing WIDE, along with other feminist networks, to enter into a critical discussion of feminist alternatives from a holistic gender perspective.

Christa Wichterich from Germany gave a very clear summary of the first triangular relationship the conference debated – the inter-linkages among the state, markets and women’s agency. Mapped onto the triangle were the experiences of women from the East, West and South and the different ways in which they had experienced the dynamics among care work, productive and reproductive work and sexualities in the context of neo-liberalism, militarism and fundamentalisms.

In all regions it meant that the feminisation of poverty is accelerating and that there are now different issues on the table than even 10 years ago. For example, we need to understand the impact of GATS on our lives as well as understand the responsibility of the EU for gender equality in terms of development and foreign policy. The whole issue of European Partnership Agreements, though highly technical, is not one we can ignore. We may have Beijing and CEDAW, but in relation to economic justice and movement of peoples, for example, those documents do not reflect adequately the world we live in. It is not a question of opening up those agreements, rather to use them strategically, and critically to defend them in the deeply concerning UN reform process.

Migration was another important issue raised throughout the conference. Key to a more nuanced discussion of migration from a feminist analysis is to take into account class, neo-colonialism, xenophobia as they are played out in the asymmetrical relations of globalisation.

Strategies

As well as analysis of state, markets and women’s agency, much of the discussion was devoted to strategizing. One important strategy proposed by Sonja Lokar from Slovenia was political sandwiching. This strategy involves invoking international, regional or national agreements (UN or EU agreements for example) while at the same time mobilizing grassroots support from the bottom, squeezing the policy makers to force them to act.

Media and innovative use of the Internet and other digital means (IPOD broadcasting, web dialogues, blogs etc.) were also advocated, not only for public dissemination and communication among the feminist movements, but also to reach out to allies in other movements, for better advocacy and stronger, more efficient networking.

Perhaps for me the most important strategy to emerge at the conference was that of the politics of friendship. This strategy includes sharing political spaces, funding resources and being willing to adjust our own particular standpoint to build a collective vision. WIDE seems now willing and committed to not only share existing spaces but also to open up, expand and create new spaces where to practice a feminist politics overlaid with the politics of friendship within the WIDE network and WIDE allies.

The conference set the tone for some important work ahead. I look forward to this expanded and enriched WIDE network deepening our analysis, building our capacity, networking and strategizing as we plan the next steps for the future.

For full WIDE July 2006 Newsletter, see website <http://www.eurosur.org/wide/home.htm>
