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Women, Gender, Feminism: Marginalization at the Inception of the World Social Forum

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Abstract

The World Social Forum (WSF) is a bi-annual meeting space for the global justice movement that facilitates the coordination of worldwide events and protests around a variety of social justice issues. I argue that although the principles of the WSF are based on feminist methods of participation, the research presented here demonstrates that women, gender, and feminism were marginalized in the program and content at the forum's inception. Empirically the paper presents the structure of programming and a quantitative examination of women's and feminist groups' participation of the first years of the WSF process. I consider the thematic development of the WSF and role of information sharing and intersectionality as feminist principles were incorporated into the WSF. I refer to various theoretical perspectives on gender including feminist political economy, post-colonialism, and queer theory to make sense of feminist participation and marginalization at the World Social Forum.

Keywords: global social movements, transnational feminism, World Social Forum, gender equality

Mujer, Género, Feminismo: Marginación en los inicios del Foro Social Mundial

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Resumen

El Foro Social Mundial (FSM) es un espacio de encuentro bianual para el movimiento de justicia global que facilita la coordinación de reuniones y protestas mundiales alrededor de gran variedad de temas relacionados con la justicia social. En este artículo argumento que a pesar de que los principios del FSM están basados en métodos de participación feministas, la investigación que se presenta aquí demuestra que las mujeres, el género, y el feminismo fueron marginados del programa y del contenido en los inicios del foro. En cuanto a contenido empírico, el artículo presenta la estructura de las programaciones y un análisis cuantitativo de los grupos de participación feministas y de grupos de mujeres de los primeros años del proceso de FSM. Considero el desarrollo de la temática del FSM y el papel de compartir información y la interseccionalidad como principios feministas que fueron incorporados en el FSM. Para dar sentido a la participación y la marginación feminista en el Foro Social Mundial, se hace referencia a varias perspectivas teóricas de género incluyendo la economía política feminista, el post-colonialismo, y la teoría queer.

Palabras clave: movimientos sociales globales, feminismo transnacional, Foro Social Mundial, igualdad de género

The World Social Forum (WSF) provides a meeting space for social movements across the globe that are working to make sense of the shape and parameters of global capitalism and to coordinate efforts in dismantling it. By producing a process to build links among activist sectors such as environmental justice, labor, racial equality, corporate power, and women's rights, the WSF extends beyond a meeting space and into a process of network building and coordinated action. Unfortunately, women organizations, feminists and feminist organizations, gender justice groups and networks, and GLBTQTI activists, engaged in the WSF have come face to face with marginalization and bias. This is evident in the limited number of events devoted to women and gender at the inception of the WSF and underrepresentation of women participants in centrally organized events. In addition, the failure of WSF organizers to recognize feminist political economic and postcolonial analyses as fundamental to processes of global capitalist expansion has been highlighted by feminists and gender justice activists and scholars. A review of the thematic organization of the first WSFs demonstrates that gender was generally overlooked as a central organizing feature of the global economy. Finally, the Feminist Dialogues (FD) were formed in 2003 by women and gender-centered organizations such as *Articulacion Feminista Marcosur (AFM)* and *Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN)* to address the marginalization of women and gendered analysis of the global economy. Unlike most other sectors of the global justice movement, women and gender advocates felt it particularly necessary to organize for the inclusion of their cause into the wider social forum process. The FD held specific events to address the ghettoization of women and gender rather than an integration of a gendered analysis of neoliberalism within the WSFs.

My attendance and involvement at multiple social forums and the Feminist Dialogues (FD) and work in coordinating WSF events for various organizations has shaped my research question and methods¹. Through ethnographic participation in the WSF I was able to observe and discuss with activists and organizers their perceptions on the marginalization of women and feminisms in the social forum process. In this paper I offer a quantitative overview of women's and feminist participation in the early years of the WSF². I utilize the WSF

Memorial, a catalogue and history of past Forums, to document actual instances of gender imbalance and patriarchal bias at the WSF between 2001 and 2004—the inception of the WSF. While this work does not provide a qualitative assessment of how women’s organizations engage in the WSF or the content of women-oriented or feminist sessions, these findings contribute empirical evidence of claims made by many feminist or women-centered organizations and participants that the WSF lacks equal representation and the integration of a gender perspective in the Forum.

This paper maintains that although gender bias was evident at the inception of the WSF, the structure, formations, and practices of the WSF are based in feminist practice and especially the success of transnational feminist networks (Moghadam, 2005; Hewitt, 2008; Desai, 2006; Tripp & Ferree, 2006). I review the WSF Charter of Principles, the document that guides the organization and practice of the WSF, to explore how feminism informed it. The transparency, lateral, and collective process that the WSF principles invoke, are based on the success of transnational feminists, particularly of the Global South, to overcome hierarchy and differences ingrained in Global North-South relationships as was demonstrated in Beijing Platform for Action (Naples & Desai, 2002). However, even if the WSF is feminist in organizational practice, my analysis demonstrates that it was not in thematic orientation and that gendered participation characterizes the initial WSFs. In a nutshell, despite the forums holding an organizational structure based on feminist practices and processes of participation, feminism and women were marginalized at the inception of the WSF. Women and feminist-centered organizations working with and within the WSF utilized avenues of inclusion in the WSF (due to its feminist framing) to initiate and advocate for feminist and gendered analyses and women inclusion in the WSF.

Before I explore the inception of the WSF through the Charter of Principles and present empirical analyses, I address the conceptualizations of women’s and feminist organizations, gender justice, and queer frameworks that have been introduced and debated as modes of participation at the WSF. This is followed by a brief summary of a gendered political economy and postcolonial perspective, a basis and trigger for feminist, women, and gender justice activism and

participation in the WSF. I offer some conclusions that rely on queer analysis for considering the integration of gender at the WSF.

Women, feminists, or gender justice activists?

Eschle and Maiguashca (2011) describe “feminist anti-globalization activism as a collective subject but not heterogeneous”. This is a helpful approach for appreciating the nuances of transnational activism around gender and sexuality. Regional and national differences in goals and feminist identities, women-centered organizations, and queer and lesbian participation in the WSF present opportunities and challenges for coordinating efforts among these groups and with other sectors of activism.

For instance, Tripp and Ferree (2006, p. 15) distinguish between feminist and women’s movements, arguing that for “some networks and organizations it may be more convenient to avoid the issue of feminist identity”. Some women of color and women from the Global South often have resisted using “feminist” as a label because of its association with privileged white middle class women from Northern nations (Naples, 1998; Mohanty, 2002)³. In some cases, the use of “women” rather than “feminist” by some organizations may be strategic as Tripp and Ferree (2006) argue, but it also can indicate an epistemological perspective of “woman” as a concrete and non-shifting identity.

Historically, women use gender as a position from which to act politically and as response to experiences of gender oppression (Naples, 1998). Butler (1990) and others writing from a queer or post-structural perspective disarticulated the rhetoric of Second Wave feminism and women’s empowerment by challenging the notion of gender identity as static and fixed. By arguing that “woman” was a status inscribed into a patriarchal hetero-normative system, Butler (1990) explains that using it as an identity from which to organize was inherently flawed and would reify a subordinate status in one form or another.

Queer analyses and the deconstruction of gender and sexuality as an identity has inspired many activists and organizations in the global justice movement to adopt the discourse of “gender justice” over feminism⁴. It is considered a progressive step towards building alliances with LGBTQI communities and social movement organizations that also

are oppressed by gender and sexuality norms or heteropatriarchy.

As a singular arena in which multiple sectors of activism meet, the WSF is one of the few places where traditional feminist and women's organizations and queer and LGBTQI activist organizations can engage. While both sets of organizations and activists are similarly oriented to injustices around gender and sexuality, most events and activities either target LGBTQI communities or women and feminism. Although the gender justice approach dominated the 2010 US Social Forum, very few events and organizations demonstrated collaboration between women-centered and queer organizations in gender justice events⁵.

In effect, the phrase "gender justice" operationalizes the stance that gender is external, something that is practiced or a process (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and not a basis of identity politics. While the inception of the WSF has been critiqued for not engaging women's organizations, the representation of gay, lesbian, queer, transgender perspectives was almost entirely unaddressed. In addition, queer analysis that deconstructs gendered categories entered WSF discourse much after its inception. New scholarship (Cantu, Naples, & Ortiz, 2009; Seidman, 1994) proposing a queer political economic perspective, offers grounds for linking the discursive analyses typical of queer theory with the more action-oriented principles of WSF participation and transnational feminism.

The involvement of feminist, gender, and women-centered organizations in the early stages of the WSF was driven by feminist political economic and post-colonial analysis and less so on a post-structural critiques of gender identity. Yet feminist political economy and post-colonial analysis, a project of both scholars and activists for several decades and the basis of transnational feminist networks, was not critical in the foundation of the WSF. The distinct material, social, and sexual realities of women shaped by race, class, and national context in a global capitalist economy catalyzed many women's and feminists' early engagement in the WSF. Given how well established and grounded feminist political economy and post-colonial analyses are, the oversight or neglect in preference for generic political economic analyses at the inception of the WSF was viewed as highly problematic by many feminist and woman-centered groups.

All Economies are Gendered (Hewitt & Karides, 2012)

Feminist political economy is not a single framework for understanding global economic processing but arguably contains specific elements that are missing in general or non-gendered analyses of global capitalism. Schools of feminist thought, including radical feminism, socialist feminism, black feminist thought, have helped to develop a feminist political economy. Post-colonial feminism, articulating that culture is constitutive of economic process (Briggs, 2002) is equally relevant to feminist activism in the WSF. Applying traditional feminist concepts to broad scale economic processes, feminist political economy and post colonialism start with the assumption that economies are gendered.

The impact of IMF and World Bank structural adjustment policies on poor and low-income women in the Global South triggered the body of literature built in the early nineties by feminist scholars (Ward & Pyle, 1990; Enloe, 1985; Mies, 1986; Fernandez-Kelly, 1985; Mohanty 1988). Prominent in these analyses is that the socially and economically subordinate position of women makes them most vulnerable to the effects of neo-liberalism but also drove the engine of export-led production and the globalization of sweatshops. These writings were early in connecting macro-economic policies to changes in the daily lives of poor and lower income women in the Global South and Global North.

Women workers in large-scale factories located in free trade zones and others working alone or in small groups in their living rooms (Hsiung, 1996) fueled the global assembly line. While traditional schools of global economy wrote extensively on the negative impact of free trade, deregulation, and unscrupulous finance schemes, feminist studies of global restructuring offered the only explanations as to how and why women workers, especially in the Global South, featured so prominently in neo-liberalism. Gender and cultural stereotypes that deem women workers in the Global South as requiring less compensation and the false description of them as docile and compliant, shaped government policies and attracted capital searching for cheap labor cost (Nam, 1996). The vast incorporation of “third world women” over the last 30 years into sweatshop labor and factory work has largely

fueled export-led development, a system of production that strips Global South nations of the ability to develop or grow food for local consumption and makes them dependent on the global market for the goods they need at increasingly higher prices.

The increase in women's paid and unpaid labor is one of the most identifiable features of neo-liberalism. Feminist post colonialists studying this phenomenon contextualize how this occurs in various regions and cultural contexts and across borders. For instance, with cuts in social programs due to IMF loan requirements, women's care work has increased to cover the absence of government programs for children, the sick, or the elderly. Additionally, Global North women's increased presence in professional fields, (and the extra work often required of professional women due to gender discrimination in these fields), the lack of or limited public childcare, and the increasing number of single mothers increased Northern women's demands for care work (Misra & Merz, 2007; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Coupled with the Southern women's need for employment, this created a transnational migration network of care work as women from the Global South leave their families to care for families in the Global North (Misra & Merz, 2007; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). Thus, biases around race and ethnicity, gender, and national status are foundational to the expansion of neo-liberal capitalism.

The triple shift, formal, informal, and household work and how they operate together to the detriment of women and the profit of global capital is one of the defining features of feminist political economy. Feminist scholars, of course, have a wider range of focus including for example the increase in militarism and violence, reproductive freedom, and limits on women's social and political expression that exist in many nations. What brings these lines of analyses together under the rubric of feminist political economy or post-colonialism is the articulation of how gender is implicated in global economic change, the use of culture, political power, and in the formation of national and international policy.

Although not a uniform perspective, the women's and feminist organizations that contribute to the WSF process hold a deep understanding of the gendered processes of the global social-political-economic system and in most cases continue to build feminist political

economic theories from the grassroots. However, just as in the academic realm, feminist analyses of neo-liberalism at the WSF are often ghettoized and misunderstood leaving a generic political economy absent of race and gender.

Transnational Feminism and the Inception of the World Social Forum

In this section I review two key aspects of transnational feminist networks and feminist organizing practices: information sharing and intersectionality. I consider how they are featured in the WSF Charter of Principles. Although much of the procedure and processes of the WSF mimic feminist transnational activism, the initial content was absent of a feminist political economic or post-colonial perspective. Supporting Eschle and Maiguashca (2011) and Hewitt (2008) I argue that without pro-active feminist and women activist organizations rallying for the inclusion of women and feminism, women's participation would be limited and a feminist political economic and post-colonial analyses would remain marginal in the WSF. I add to this discussion, by demonstrating that the path available for women and feminists activists to gain even marginal inclusion was due precisely to the feminist framework adopted in the WSF Charter of Principles.

Information Sharing

In her book, Moghadam (2005) traces the development of transnational feminist networks, arguing that they have become independent and significant actors in the global political arena. Her research demonstrates that information sharing was a key factor in the progress of feminist networks that often organized around particular issues such as reproduction and militarism (Moghadam, 2005). Studies on feminist activism also argue that the sharing of stories, experiences, and strategies is a significant aspect of feminist activism. For example, Ezekial (2002) documents consciousness-raising as the collection of personal experiences to motivate political action. In her discussion of feminist organizing in the 1990s, Moss (1995, pp. 176) explains that

feminist activism is guided by the “. . . gathering and sharing of information and by giving support in resisting oppression”. Finally, Baumgardener and Richards (2004) offering a more mainstream and US-oriented feminist perspective, also present activists’ advice to future generations as part of the information sharing logic of feminist practice.

In other words, it is the emphasis and call for the lateral exchange of information (rather than elitist or vanguardist approaches) that facilitated ties among women locally and also helped feminists to overcome the challenge of the hierarchies embedded in Global South-North relations. The first principle of the WSF Charter of Principles, the document considered to be the foundational framework for participation in the WSF, mimics feminist strategies of information sharing almost directly. The first principle states:

The World Social Forum is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Humankind and between it and the Earth.

The overlap between feminist participatory practice at all levels including: local consciousness-raising groups, national politics, and transnational networks is evident. The information sharing approach also is apparent in Principle Twelve of the WSF Charter which states that the forum “. . . encourages understanding and mutual recognition among its participant organizations and movements, and places special value on the exchange among them . . .”. Many of the sessions and events organized at the WSF are utilized for trading information and strategies cross-nationally around specific issues.

The transnational feminist networks that developed through the last decades of the 20th century built cross-national collaboration over a range of gender-related issues. The success of transnational feminism in building global networks that are inclusive of large well-funded

networks and smaller grassroots organizations is unique (Moghadam, 2005; Desai, 2006). Transnational feminism also succeeded in developing collaboration between Global South and Global North activists and organizations that have created, to some extent, effective platforms for action (Moghadam, 2005; Tripp & Ferree, 2006). The goals of the founders of the WSF are also to facilitate building thick networks of social justice activism through information sharing that are influential locally, nationally, and globally.

Intersectionality

Intersectional analysis is a central principle of post Second Wave feminism thought and action. Although Eschle and Maguischa (2011) argue that Second Wave feminism is the foundation of the global feminist movement, I suggest that black feminist thought and post-colonial critiques of Second Wave feminism permitted the development of a global feminist social movement. Black women activists in the late 1960s such as Beal (1969) and other members of the Third World Women's Alliance, articulated the "double jeopardy" black women faced that was not appreciated within the frames of Second Wave feminism that concentrated on gender but lapsed in its consideration of race and ethnicity. Later Hill-Collins (1990) brought the intersectional perspective into the academy arguing that race, class, and gender are experienced or constructed separately. Mohanty's (1988) oft published post-colonial critique of Global North scholarship of Global South women, also drew attention to the weakness of some feminist analysis to accept and appreciate the standpoint of women in less privileged positions and contexts. Mohanty (1988, p. 255) states "third world feminisms run the risk of marginalization or ghettoization from both mainstream (left and right) and Western feminist discourses". In revisiting "Under Western Eyes" in 2002 Mohanty (2003, p. 503) explains that her critique was not meant to imply (although some had seen it this way) an impossibility of solidarity between "Western" and "Third World" feminists, but sought "building a non-colonizing feminist solidarity across borders". By the mid-1990s, the scholarly and activist efforts of feminists and women marginalized by race and region had

distinctly reorganized feminism, making it able to be transnational and transformative globally (Desai, 2006; Tripp & Ferree, 2006).

Hassim (2001), reporting on South African feminism, argues that the dictate of contemporary feminist activism is acknowledging gender, race, and class as interlinked. Desai (2006) also explains that intersectional analysis and “transversal politics” (quoting Yuval-Davis, 2006) were pioneered by the transnational women’s movement. By using their experiences, women marginalized by race, class, and gender founded the praxis and theory of intersectional politics.

An intersectional perspective is demonstrated in three of the fourteen WSF Charter of Principles. Principle four, which discusses alternatives to neoliberalism states the WSF “will respect universal human rights, and those of all citizens - men and women - of all nations”. Obviously, the reference to men and women lacks a queer or critical perspective of gender, but nevertheless is consistent with many of the first transnational feminists organizations engaging with the WSF. Including this distinction in the Charter represents an attempt to articulate a differentiation between the construction of men and women’s experiences. A more articulate intersectional perspective is offered in Principle Nine which states the following:

The World Social Forum will always be a forum open to pluralism and to the diversity of activities and ways of engaging the organizations and movements that decide to participate in it, as well as the diversity of genders, ethnicities, cultures, generations and physical capacities, providing they abide by this Charter of Principles.

The call for diversity argues that the WSF should include a multiplicity of perspectives and provides an avenue for feminist discourse to influence the forum process. Yet inclusion of diverse activist sectors does overcome the challenges for the cross-pollination of perspectives at the WSF. Finally, Principle Eleven holds the recognition that “capitalist globalization” is “racist” and “sexist” and environmentally destructive. This analysis captures feminist and postcolonial perspectives of the political economy suggesting that in the original summation of the goals and process of the WSF, there was at

least a recognition that gender and race bias are embedded in the global economic system.

Hewitt (2008, p. 123) argues, “If women’s movements had not begun to participate actively in organizing the Forum and demand that their voices be taken seriously, the Forum might have continued to neglect women’s concerns and struggles”. Desai (2006) also critiques recent transnational activism as missing a gendered perspective that seems to only be embraced by women and feminists. In their book, Eschle and Manguashca (2011) document the various strategies feminist and women organizations employed to alter the trajectory of the WSF. Essentially, these groups exploited the rhetoric and organizing principles of the WSF to demand and make room for feminist and women participants. In the following section I will present the degree to which women and feminist perspectives and events were present at the inception of the WSF.

Data and Methods

I use content analysis to make an empirical assessment of (1) gender representation, and the thematic inclusion of (2) women’s rights issues, and (3) feminist political economy, in the first 4 years of the WSF. To assess the representation of women and feminist organizations, and a feminist or gender perspective, we examined the programs of WSF from 2001 thru 2004. The data for this paper were collected on the WSF official webpage (www.forumsocialmundial.br). For each year of the Forum, the Memorial provides a full or partial program of the WSF, as well as information on the debates and resolutions that took place, and data on the number of participants, organizations, and national representation. This analysis focuses on WSF-sponsored events or large self-organized events. It does not include the smaller self-organized events listed in the Memorial. For each consecutive year the Memorial provides progressively more information on the events at WSF as well as on the panelists, for instance by identifying their organizational affiliation and national origin. The type of events and the structure and organization of the Forum change from year to year. The expanding categories of events at the WSF include conferences, workshops, testimonies, tables, and panels. The initial programming of the WSF in

2001 and 2002 as reflected in the Memorial contained WSF sponsored events including conferences and panels. In 2003, the program began to incorporate the self-organized events - panels, conferences, and workshops that are coordinated and sponsored by organizations attending the WSF rather than by the International Committee (IC) of the WSF. The life of the Forum and its significance to the global justice movement primarily rest in the self-organized events that largely oriented the Forum beginning in 2003 and were formalized in the program in 2004. WSF 2004 also initiated another shift in program formatting. Panels, conferences, and tables that had been organized by the WSF in relation to a particular theme were replaced with non-thematic WSF sponsored events and the addition of large self-organized events. This resulted in 35 separate events. Although the themes did not continue to dictate the organization of the program they were still a centralizing force for topics of events and panels. By 2005 all WSF events were self-organized or in other words organized by participant organizations and continue to be through the last forum held in 2011.

Therefore, this study is particularly able to assess the early years of the forum, prior to the practice of self-organized events by participating groups. Between 2001 and 2004, the IC of the WSF decided most panels and participants. This study targets panels, conferences, and tables sponsored by the WSF as well as the large self-organized (co-sponsored with the WSF) events in 2004 to examine the gender dimension of the initial programming of the WSF. This research did not assess some of the self-organized panels that may differ by topic and participation from WSF sponsored events. The data enable an interesting analysis that assesses how the WSF was shaped at its inception.

Web searches were used in most cases to confirm the gender of individuals, but could not be unequivocally identified for 5 of the panelists. To determine those events that dealt directly with feminist or gendered analysis I counted any event that referred to women or men specifically as well as gender, feminism, or gendered injustices such as domestic abuse. The events that focused on sexual diversity were not included. Finally, I examined the thematic development of the WSF from 2001-2005. Each WSF has several themes that organize the programming for that Forum. The themes play a highly important role in organizing the forum.

Table 1
Trajectory of Themes at the World Social Forum

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006 Caracas
Wealth Production and Social Reproduction	X	X				X
Access to Wealth and Sustainability	X	X	X		X	
Civil Society and Media	X	X	X	X	X	X
Political Power and Democracy	X	X	X		X**	X
Principles and Values, Human Rights, Diversity and Equality			X	X	X**	X
Anti-Militarism and Promoting Peace			X	X	X	
Democracy, Ecological and Economic Security				X		
Natural Resources as Alternatives to Commodification					X	X
Arts, Creation, and Culture					X	
Ethics, Cosmovisions, and Spiritualities					X	
Autonomous Thought, Re-Appropriation and Socialization of Knowledge and Technologies					X	

* The themes/axes as listed are based on the WSF official themes. Beginning with 2003 the wording of the themes/axes vary from year to year.

** Two themes have been collapsed into one category.

I participated in the three recent WSF (2006, 2007, 2009) in which histories and practice of earlier social forums were discussed in the various events I attended. I also rely on the articles, summaries, critiques and reviews of activists and organizers for analyzing the marginal location of feminism at the WSF.

It well recognized that the WSF process generally and feminist participation in it is “unstable and difficult to represent,” and “difficult to assess in a simple and straightforward way” (Wilson, 2007; Hewitt, 2008). Therefore, the findings here, like all assessments of the WSF, should be considered as contributing to the substantive and methodological project of researching the World Social Forum.

Findings

Trajectory of WSF Themes

The WSF themes presented in Table 1 demonstrate that for the first two years economic themes dominated the program. The years 2001 and 2002 were the only two years with the same themes. Wealth Production and Social Production, Access to Wealth and Sustainability, Civil Society and Media, Political Power and Democracy, reflect the initial economic frame of the organizing body of WSF. Nevertheless, Social Reproduction at least suggests an appreciation for labor outside the labor market. In addition, the themes, namely Civil Society and Media, Political Power and Democracy, address (however indirectly) social inequalities inscribed in the global economy. In 2003 the Forum introduced two more themes: first, Anti-militarism and Promoting Peace; second, Principles and Values, Human Rights, Diversity and Equality, which was intended to embody areas of social inequality such as race, gender, and sexuality.

One of the first feminist challenges to the organization of the World Social Forum was in 2002 at the event “Challenges for Feminism in a Globalized World”, wherein a series of presentations by various activists called for the integration of a feminist perspective into the WSF and for the integration of gender and diversity as a crosscutting theme into the WSF process (Mtetwa, 2002). Not only was increasing women’s

representation within the Forum a major point of concern, but as Ana Irma Rivera Lassen (2002), attorney and activist for race and gender equality in the Caribbean explains, simply getting women to the table would be inadequate:

The absence of women will not be solved simply by getting women involved in discussing economic and financial issues; it will also be necessary for these issues to be viewed from a gender perspective.

Principles, Values, and Human Rights have remained an axis of the WSF. In 2004 when the WSF moved to Mumbai, concern for ecological devastation was finally included, and the number of key themes returned to four. The year 2005 saw a growing number of themes capturing the interests of diverse organizations and participants attending the Forum. However, since 2004, Human Rights and Diversity, Ecology and Anti-militarism, Sustainable Development, Political Rights, and Media Control have remained as regular organizing principles.

Transversal Themes

To further address claims that the WSF was not giving sufficient attention to social inequality and diversity, the WSF created transversal axes or themes. Transversal axes were adopted in 2002, but became officially part of the program in 2004. The 2006 Caracas WSF described the adoption of the transversal themes as follows:

To express a will to involve [gender and diversity] in the analysis, actions, and the practice of the WSF...These axes revalorize and give visibility to actors, relations, trajectories, and histories...To formulate these transversal axes and to apply them to the WSF process is an important signal of inclusion for the various existing social movements... to stimulate reflections, self-criticisms, and the appropriation of concepts that were before seen as sectarian.

Transversal themes for 2004 included: a) Imperialistic Globalization,

b) Patriarchy, c) Casteism, Racism, and Social Exclusions, d) Religious Sectarianism, Identity Politics, Fundamentalism, and e) Militarism and Peace. In 2005 Gender was introduced as a transversal theme, along with Struggles against Patriarchal Capitalism, The Struggle against Racism, and Other types of Exclusion based on ancestry, and diversities.

At the polycentric WSF 2006 in Caracas, the transversal themes were simplified to gender and diversity. The establishment of gender as a transversal axis may reflect the increased recognition by Forum organizers and participants of the importance of gender as a dynamic of global capitalism. It also marks the strength of women-centered organizations at the WSF. Yet, the establishment of gender as a transversal rather than main theme is problematic for many women’s groups participating in the WSF.

Table 2
Percentage of Gender, Feminist, or Woman-Related Panels at WSF (2001-2004)

Year	Total # of panels	% Gender, Feminist, or Women	Total # of large self-organized panels or tables and conferences	% Gender, Feminist, or Women
2001	16	0		
2002	27	3.7		
2003	31	3.22	14	0
2004	13	7.69	34	8.82
Total	87	3.44		
Total *	135	4.44		
Total **	246	4.87		

* Total with large self-organized events, tables, and conferences

** Total including sub-categories of panels in 2001

Table 2 shows the percentage of gender, feminist, or women-related panels. The first year, 2001, had sixteen separate events, none of which articulated gender, feminist, or women's issues as the lead topic of the panel. However, under each of the sixteen panels were questions or topics that were to be addressed during the course of the panel. Of the 111 themes and sub themes listed, 6 were gender or feminist oriented. These are provided in Table 3, which lists the title of gender, feminist, or women-related panels until 2004. The WSF programs for 2002 and 2003 as given in the Memorial devoted about 4 percent of the programming to gender, feminist, or women-related panels. In Mumbai 2004 the number of gender and women-related panels almost doubled. This was the case for both the WSF sponsored conferences or panels and the large self-organized events. As explained earlier, in 2005 (not included in this analysis) when the WSF returned to Porto Alegre, all the events, about 2500, were organized by the organizations in attendance. With the commencement of the self-organizing format, future analysis of WSF programming may show different proportions of gender or feminist-related panels or conferences.

An examination of the list of conferences, panels, and sub-categories of 2001 suggests that they are not necessarily focused on the gendered nature of the world-system or globalization but rather on how women are directly affected by it. Of course, without a content analysis of what transpired in the panels and conference there is no way to confirm the absence of a feminist political economic analysis. However, a study of the events' titles suggests that speakers primarily consider the results of capitalism and patriarchy such as domestic violence, forced migration, trafficking of women, war crimes, and labor market inequalities and that panels such as Women and Globalization or Women and Power address the expansion of global capitalism as such is inherently gendered.

Table 4 summarizes the percentage of women panelists and facilitators at the WSF. Generally, based on data collected in the Memorial, women comprised close to thirty and just below forty percent of WSF panelists between 2001-2004. There is a trend, with a slight drop in 2003, of increasing numbers of women panelists. This may be due to women's organizations shifting their attention from the actual forum to organizing independent events that were distinctly expanded in 2003. 2004 had the highest representation of women panelists, and also

Table 3

List of Gender, Feminist, or Woman Panels, Sub-Categories, or Self-Organized Events at WSF (2001-2004)*

YEAR	TOPIC
2001	Work Organization, Sexual Division of Work, and Non-Salaried Female Labor
	Technological Innovation, Productive, Reformulation, and Work Deterioration and Their Impacts on the Worker’s Life, Particularly Women
	Gender
	Women and Power
	Domestic and Sexual Violence
2002	Women's Movement
	Migrations, Peopole (Women, Children, Refugees)
2003	Culture of Violence, Domestic Violence
	Struggle for Equality, Men and Women, How to Effect Real Change?
2004	Wars Against Women and Women Against Wars
	Women and Globalization
	World Court of Women on US War Crimes
	The Struggle Against Exploitative Migration Especially Trafficking of Women and Children: The Globalization of Gender Insecurity

*The topics listed for 2001 do not reflect panel titles but sub-categories for discussion within a panel.

as shown in Table 2, the largest proportion of gender-themed panels possibly reflecting the concerted efforts of the women’s organizations discussed earlier. The percentage of women facilitators tells a somewhat similar story with more extremes and a larger drop. The data on facilitators is somewhat limited so that the drop to 9 percent in 2004 may reflect the lack of facilitators in self-organized events. The hike in

women facilitators stands in contrast to the decrease in women panelists. It may be the case that when women increasingly contribute as panelists they will be less likely to serve as facilitators. On the whole, women make up more than a third of the panel presence at the WSF between 2001 and 2004.

Table 4

Percentage of Women as Panelists and Facilitators and Percentage of Gender, Feminist, or Woman Organizations Represented in WSF Panels and Large Self-Organized Events (2002-2004)

YEAR	TOTAL # PANELISTS	% WOMEN	TOTAL # FACILITAT ORS	% WOMEN	TOTAL # ORGANIZA TIONS	% GENDER, FEMINIST, OR WOMAN ORG.
2001	58	27.58	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
2002	98	37.68	26	23.07	125	32.00
2003	229	33.62	31	54.83	167	22.75
2004	246	43.49	11	9.09	157	14.64
Total	602	37.54	68	34.72	449	23.13

Table 4 also shows the percentage of women's organizations that were listed in the Memorial for 2001-2004 WSF programs. They are listed in the program as either the panelists' affiliated organizations or as sponsors of a particular conference or panel. There is a decreasing trend in the percentage of women or feminist organizations participating in the forum. An approximately 10 percent decrease between 2002 and 2003 and an 8 percent decrease between 2003 and 2004. The overall percentage of these organizations between 2002 and 2004 is just over 20 percent.

Table 5 displays the women's or feminist organizations that were represented at the WSF according to the Memorial. It also shows the years in which these organizations participated in the WSF and in

Table 5

Feminist, Gender, or Women's Organizations in WSF Memorial of Large Panels (2002-2004)

YEARS	ORGANIZATION
2002, 2004 (2)	DAWN
2002(2), 2003, 2004	World March of Women
2002	Red Latinoamerica de Mujeres
2002	RAWA, Revolutionary Women of Afghanistan
2002	Black Women's Institute
2002	Women in Black, Israel
2002	Association for the Advancement of Senegalese Woman
2003	Women for Alternatives
2003	International Gender and Trade Network
2003	Red de Mujeres Transformando la Economía
2003	Woman of Colours Resource
2003	Tanzania Gender Network Programme
2003	Red e Economía e Feminismo
2003, 2004	All India Women Progressive Women's Association
2003	Coalition Against Trafficking in Women
2003	World Network for Reproductive Rights
2003	Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights
2003	Women Against Fundamentalism
2003, 2004(2)	Articulación Feminista Marcosur
2003	Movement Mujeres Negr, America y Caribe
2003	Comite de America Latina y el Caribe para la Defensa de los Derechos de la Mujer
2003	Red Mujer
2003	Red de Mulheres del Sur Ocidente
2004(2)	National network of Autonomous Women's Groups
2004	National Alliance of Women
2004	National Federation of Indian Woman
2004	All India Democratic Women's Association
2004	Colombian Women's Consensus
2004	Creative Women's Alliance Centre for Women's Studies
2004	Lola Kampanyeras
2004	Lebanese Council of Women
2004	Gender Support Network
2004	Women Transforming the Economy Network
2004	Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice

parentheses, the number of panels on which they were present. There are several organizations that have been active in the WSF since its inception including World March of Women, consisting of 5,500 women's groups from 163 countries and territories, DAWN, and Articulaci3n Feminista Marcosur. Many of the women's organizations are nationally based and in 2004 at the Mumbai WSF, there were a number of Indian women's organizations. Several organizations are both gender and race identified organizations such as the Black Women's Institute and the Woman of Colours Resource. A few organizations focus on single issues including reproductive rights but most are women's organizations with broad agendas.

Discussion

The title of Sonia Alvarez's article – “Another World (also Feminist) is Possible” – captures the sentiment of many of the women and feminist activist groups that participate in the Forum. The Forum is recognized as a space where feminist organizations can initiate contacts, expand their organizational capacities, and strengthen the transnational feminist network. I argue that this is precisely because the WSF mimics principles of feminist activism that women and feminist organization were able to exploit. Feminist organizations debate the challenge the WSF presents for building a feminist orientation into the process (Hewitt, 2008). However, as Alvarez notes, these critiques stand alongside a commitment to continue participating in the Forum despite the fact that women, as the poorest of the poor, are not a centralized concern.

Decades of feminist scholarship have demonstrated that addressing gender inequality is pivotal to “making another world possible”. In other words, strategies for combating neo-liberalism need to be devised using a gendered lens. Women do 80 percent of the world's work and own 1 percent of the world's property, and are 70 percent of the world's poor (Borren, 2002). The gendered world-system affects not only those of us who fall into the constructed category of women particularly, but all people, since gendered systems are a vehicle for the global expansion of neo-liberal capitalism. For several decades feminists have been actively

informing progressive political organizations about the influence of gender in shaping politics and economics (Van Dueren, 2002). Yet when the left or social justice movements give women a voice, it is usually only other women who listen, rather than the broader group or movement.

The findings above tend to support criticisms that the WSF has been gender-biased in its programming and that women-focused events are the only arena in which women predominated. The limited number of panels on gender or feminist-related issues seems to reflect a low integration of feminist political economic perspectives into the overall organization of the first four years of the WSF. While this paper lacks comparative data on the percentage of panels devoted to other topics, the overall average of 4 percent for gendered themes suggests that women and feminist political economy were given little specific attention. Furthermore, these panels and conferences primarily are sponsored by women's organizations. While a feminist political economic perspective should inform events with titles such as Debt and Global Restructuring, this was not the case.

The most promising expression of the WSF is its organic nature - change seems to occur not as a series of dictates but as a response to the organizations and groups that are increasingly claiming the WSF as their own. The thematic trajectory of the WSF also indicates commitment to reform and inclusiveness. The development of transversal themes in 2002 and their formal appearance in 2004 reflects the momentum for inclusion of social concerns such as patriarchy, racism, and identity politics in WSF programming. On the one hand, we can interpret transversality as demonstrating at least a partial commitment to a feminist political economic analysis that realizes gender as inherent or transversal in the structures of capitalism. On the other, the absence of gender as one of the main themes or axes suggests that its centrality to the global system is not fully realized. Markedly, the 2007 WSF held in Nairobi, Kenya included gender as one of its nine main themes. The movement of gender from absence, to transversal, and finally centrality demonstrates the durability of the WSF Principles that keeps many groups, including feminist organizations, engaged with the forum process.

The WSF's is truly a novel form of political organizing and social

movement action. Because the WSF invokes feminist process, it is by intention malleable in ways that institutions, like the United Nations or a university, are not. Of course, these permanent institutions can change and have done so to include more egalitarian practices, but this takes years of organizing, lobbying, and politicking to institutionalize and even more time for this change actually to be implemented. Activists who have struggled across time and space for social justice in a host of causes including feminism have often been told that social change takes time.

Rather than having to convince a hierarchical institutionalized body with official decision making power that bias or underrepresentation exists, women's organizations as well as other marginalized groups are able to control more of the political space and oblige the WSF to fill its mandate of making another world possible. The ability of feminist activists resides in the feminist practice and organizational forms the WSF is based upon. Because it is obliged by virtue of its Principles, the WSF provides a road for infusing feminist analysis into economically limited perspectives of neo-liberalism and widening the participation of women in all aspects of its organization.

Postscript: Belém and the Housewives of the World Social Forum

In Belém, Brazil, the site of the 2009 WSF, the Feminist Dialogues events were held within the context of the Forum for the purpose of engaging a wider audience. Speakers continued to emphasize the importance of making economic thought more responsible to women and their families, of men sharing social and household responsibilities as a matter of economic change, and outlined what they see as new divisions within the women's movement such as those based on rural versus urban livelihoods.

At two FD events and at other workshops focusing on gender and development, the prospects of feminist organizations and feminists at the WSF was addressed. The position that the WSF is a positive space of engagement for women's groups was reinforced. The success of women and gender at the WSF in Mumbai, for instance, was credited to Indian feminists who brought patriarchy to the center of that event.

Several leaders in transnational feminist organizing repeated that women's organizations have "no choice but to engage" or "don't have the option of not linking up" with movements of the WSF.

The added labor this requires of women's and feminist organizations as participants in other movement sectors was recognized, and this highlights the "second shift" required of feminist organizing (Hewitt & Karides, 2012). A few organizers underscored the fact that feminism and women's issues (and racism) are often given mere lip service in the Forum process and in particular movement sectors, but this should not keep women's groups from engaging with the WSF. That the overwhelming majority of participants at gender-oriented events are women remains the same. That some men perceive them to be intentionally segregated contradicts the WSF mission of collective participation.

Most profoundly, at the FD event "A Dialogue Between Movements: Breaking Barriers, Breaking Bridges", an indigenous activist from Brazil discussed the problems with gender violence and subordination within her movement and explained indigenous women's strategies for addressing these violations. Another speaker representing a large Indian trade union talked about the difficulties of getting middle-aged men to identify India's burgeoning labor force of young women as workers to be unionized. It was largely these young women workers insisting on their presence and participation that led to their incorporation in the union. In both these examples, and a third given on the status of women's issues in Via Campesina, it was clearly the women, the "wives" of the organizations, that do the added labor to bring women, gender issues, and feminist analysis to the forefront.

Feminists' housework within the WSF is far from complete and is an unfortunate requirement. Quite subtle and significant was the suggestion by feminist speakers that many movement sectors still need to be "nurtured" to appreciate women's groups and feminism as partners and equal (not secondary) participants in a network of anti-neoliberal movements. From a queer or gender justice perspective, the perpetuation of women's and feminist marginalization at the WSF, and their constant efforts at engaging the "mainstream" of the global justice movement may be an outcome of acting from the position of a gender identity. Butler (1990, p. 4) argues, "the universality of the feminist

subject, woman, is undermined by constraints of the representational discourse in which it functions". Because feminism is circumscribed within a legal and social system that produces the subject it represents "feminism does not get its own constitutive power" (Butler, 1990, p. 3). In other words the construction of women, and operating from that identity or with a feminist strategy to gain representation or an understanding of systemic inequalities reifies unequal gender relations. The question queer analysis provokes is, "What's the point of extending representation to a group that excludes those who don't fit in it normatively?".

The repeated efforts of organizations engaged in the FD and other feminist and women's organization that challenge the negligence of feminist perspectives on the global economy, is fodder that supports queer analysis. In the FD events I attended, feminists invited leaders in other sectors to engage with feminism and not the other way around. Besides the men that were representing the organizations invited to attend, the event was almost entirely dominated by women attendees. Tripp and Ferree (2006, p. 7) argue that:

To have a feminist goal is no way inconsistent with having other political and social goals as well. The question of where feminism stands on the list of priorities for any group or individual is an empirical one.

They argue that feminist organizations could prioritize other goals such as income distribution implying that women would not have to sit at the center of such an effort. Tripp and Ferree (2006) also suggest that organizations that do not define themselves as feminist may incorporate feminist goals and that this is shaped by setting and political choice.

However, activists are handed a conundrum that requires future research on feminist, queer, and women's global activism from various perspectives. If we refrain from acting from a feminist or women-centered identity, we may, as Butler (1990) suggests, ameliorate or reduce the effects of marginalization from a system that is inherently unequal. Yet how will attention be drawn to the particularistic position of those most oppressed by gender constructs? Although Tripp and Ferree (2006) suggest that organizations may pick up feminist goals,

this has not been generally the case in the WSF. Who will agitate for a wider representation of genders in various forums and at central events? And how will the perennial attack on reproductive freedom, sexual expression, and gendered violence be defended? When will the global economy be interpreted as a system that relies on a set of social inequalities that is inscribed upon some bodies and not others? These are some of the questions that require the attention of activists and scholars from a range of theoretical positions so that we do not perpetuate the housework of women and feminist organizations for access and analytical attention in progressive spaces.

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Notes

¹ Participation includes the 1st Social Forum of the Americas in Quito, Ecuador, The Polycentric Social Forum in Caracas, Venezuela, the 7th World Social Forum and Feminist Dialogues in Nairobi, Kenya, the Workshop on the WSF in Durban, South Africa, the first United States Social Forum in Atlanta, GA, the World Social Forum and Feminist Dialogues (FD) events in Belem, Brazil 2009, and the 2nd US Social Forum in Detroit, Michigan in 2010.

² I use the terms such “women”, “feminist”, and “gender” with the understanding that they are problematic and problemitized by both scholars and activists as I will discuss further.

³ Certainly, mainstream rhetoric and the negative stereotyping of feminism also facilitated its dismantling.

⁴ Hewitt and Karides ([work in progress](#)) make the relationship of queer, feminism, and gender justice activism the analytical focus of their research on the US Social Forum. For example, the women’s working group for the first US Social Forum in 2007 was changed to the gender justice working group for the second US Social Forum in 2010, creating both political and logistical challenges for pursuing feminist-centered critique and participation in the forum.

⁵ One exception would be the World March of Women that sponsors events at the WSF that address gay and lesbian rights as well as women’s economic issues.

⁶ Eschle and Magaishca (2011, p. 53) state “In sum, the second-wave feminist movement has been the most important general influence upon feminist antiglobalization activism, providing ideas and organizational infrastructure”. Although they do locate examples of Second Wave feminism in India and Brazil, they are less focused on the critique of black feminism and postcolonialism that I argue opened up a route for transnational collaboration.

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