

## Is another world possible without the women's perspective?

By Patricia Daniel,  
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The seventh annual gathering of the World Social Forum brings the world to Africa as activists, social movements, networks, coalitions and other progressive forces from Asia-Pacific, Latin America, the Caribbean, north America, Europe and all corners of the African continent converge in Nairobi, Kenya for five days of cultural resistance and celebration ([20-25 January 2007](#) [1]).

The first World Social Forum (WSF) meeting took place in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001, aiming to challenge the World Economic Forum (WEF) in [Davos](#) [2]. The WSF has since become an annual event for individuals and organisations opposing the neo-liberal policies of the WEF - which have particular impact on the sovereignty, human rights and livelihoods of people in the developing world.

The WSF belief is expressed in their slogan: "another world is possible". But to what extent does this include a women's perspective?

In January 2006 the WSF came to Africa in the polycentric forum Caracas-Karachi-Bamako. The forum in [Bamako \(Mali\)](#) [3] was seen of paramount importance to Africa - a continent particularly affected by neo-liberalism. It offered progressive forces there the first opportunity since the popular resistance of the 1990s, to significantly set their struggles and alternatives in a global seeking of solidarity towards the construction of a fairer world.

As one of the leaders of the organising committee, [Aminata Traoré](#) [4], former minister of culture and tourism in Mali, worked hard to ensure that the Bamako forum highlighted the position and concerns of women. One of the key themes was entitled "the universe of women". Discussions were held on FGM, domestic violence, HIV/Aids, teenage prostitution, land rights, economic justice and economic literacy. The role of women in peace-building was also included as well as challenging questions such as: "do women leaders simply follow the male model of operation?"

In addition, a session of the World Court of Women sat to hear women bear witness. Set up in 1992, the court is a symbolic process that holds public hearings on crimes against women, including the violation of their rights. The court's [theme](#) [5] for the 2006 WSF was "resistance to wars - wars of globalisation, wars against women".

African women spoke fiercely about the challenges. "We know that we have paid a hard price for globalisation. It is critical to understand the process and what it has done to poor countries, particularly women and children," explained Aminata Traoré.

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Patricia Daniel is blogging the World Social Forum in Nairobi for openDemocracy – see "[Women at the World Social Forum](#) [8]"

Also by Patricia Daniel in openDemocracy:

"[Mali: everyone's favourite destination](#) [9]" (11 May 2006)

"[Africa: ask the women](#) [10]" (3 August 2006)

"[Soldiers without guns](#) [11]" (3 November 2006)

"[Africa: tools of liberation](#) [12]"  
(23 November 2006)

In preparation for the Nairobi WSF, a discussion paper was presented by [Roselynn Musa](#) [13] of Femnet at a public forum, supported by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, on "gendering the WSF process" ([Nairobi, May 2006](#) [14]).

The paper includes evidence from WSF participants of:

- a predominance of male presenters on panels followed by largely male-dominated discussions
- a dismissal of women's complaints when they raise the question: "how can we create another world when we don't have healthy gender dynamics in these panels?"
- a resistance to the feminist agenda, which remains on the margins of the forum
- the feminist struggle still seems something by women for women. Few if any men are present in the gender/ feminist workshops and panels
- gender/ feminist issues are not integrated into all the themes: economy, for example, is still seen as a neutral issue.

And even on top of all that:

- Women participants are subject to sexual harassment, physical violence, including rape, by male participants

Musa concludes: "The World Social Forum process, unfolding against the complex tapestry of real and concrete social conditions, cannot be hermetically sealed and insulated from all the troubling manifestations of inequality between men and women."

Subsequently, [Onyango Oloo](#) [15], the (male) national coordinator of the Kenya Social Forum, which is the lead organisational body for the Nairobi WSF, has disseminated the findings of the paper more widely in order to [stimulate](#) [16] the debate locally.

[Violence against women](#) [17] in Africa is an ever-increasing concern. "Listening to the sports commentaries on the radio or browsing through certain weekly columns by male writers", Oloo says, "it is evident that sexism and misogyny in Kenya cuts across age, class, tribe, race, religion, creed, urban/rural divides and other cleavages (sic!) in society."

Oloo celebrates the involvement of African women in national social forums around the continent. But he also [points out](#) [18] that while eastern African women are clearly "right in the

thick of things when it comes to planning, organizing and mobilizing for WSF Nairobi 2007, simultaneously the process itself remains male-driven and male-centred."

He proposes three measures to address the problem.

- establish a Women's Commission as a substructure in the organising committee
- encourage African men to embrace the F word and regender the planning process: "No one can be a socialist, a Pan-Africanist or a self-declared revolutionary if they hold as anathema the straightforward credo of feminism: equality between women and men"
- take a zero tolerance stand against rape and carry out an active awareness-raising campaign on this during the forum, with the help of [Femnet](#) [19], [Oxfam](#) [20] and other relevant organisations.

## The missing dimension

One of the issues that will be discussed at the Nairobi forum is the G8 summit, to be hosted by Germany in June 2007. The G8 lobby also brings together a range of civil society groups "in a worldwide [resistance](#) [21] against the neo-liberal economic system: we want to attack capitalist politics, which are so contemptuous of humankind, and to live alternatives to that."

In an early announcement of her plans for the G8 presidency, chancellor Angela Merkel has [proposed](#) [22] that each G8 country should "pick a partnership" with an African country in order to promote a different approach to development.

Merkel has also suggested a summit meeting with heads of African governments to discuss the idea. So far, there is only one female head of government in Africa ([Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf](#) [23]) out of fifty-eight countries.

Since the 2005 [summit at Gleneagles](#) [24], Africa remains a focus for G8 and therefore the WSF in Nairobi provides an ideal opportunity for African civil society voices to be heard in the coordination of G8 lobby planning.

An international working group for [anti-G8 action](#) [25] was set up at a preparation camp of 1000+ participants in summer 2006 and an international gathering to develop plans for the protests will be held in Warsaw (9-11 February 2007). Civil-society groups are particularly active in [Germany](#) [26], the Netherlands and [France](#) [27].

A quick scan over the relevant websites suggests that a similar male-dominated process is at work as that identified in the WSF. None of the major themes appear to be gendered. For example, the focus of the protests on migration and the rights of refugees makes no [reference](#) [28] whatsoever to women, let alone those issues particularly affecting them.

However, the [dissent! wiki](#) [29] lists the contact group for cases of sexist attacks - a deliberate political response to the recognition that "sexism and sexualized violence are happening in every place where many people meet - thus even on 'our' congresses and camps." The group confronts those who commit sexual violence as well as counsel those who suffer from it.

A women/ lesbian/ transgender meeting was held in the summer and a network of groups in Germany has been established under this name, to [discuss](#) [30] "our vision for camp 2007 and our camp area as well as what we expect from our own mobilisation."

But as regards the specific needs of women in Africa, there is little on the G8 lobby's agenda. A series of lectures on "the UN millennium development goals: global and local developments"

has been organised by *Eine Welt Netzwerk* [31] (One World Network) in cooperation with the university of Hamburg. The programme has a focus on "poverty" but gender is only considered as a separate issue (as in the third millennium development goal [32]). There is no apparent attempt to deconstruct each of the eight goals according to gender equality, as the World March of Women [33] did back in 2005.

openDemocracy has published twenty-two articles from and about the World Social Forum, 2002-06. They include:

Paul Kingsnorth, "The end of the beginning [34]" (13 February 2002)

Ezequiel Adamovsky & Susan George, "What is the point of Porto Alegre? Activists from two generations in dialogue [35]"  
(21 January 2003)

Solana Larsen, "Voices from a new world [36]"  
(29 January 2003)

Kamal Mitra Chenoy, "Dateline Mumbai: the 2004 World Social Forum [37]"  
(9 January 2004)

Caspar Henderson, "The whole world is here [38]"  
(22 January 2004)

Caspar Henderson, Solana Larsen & Vince Medeiros, "Portraits from the World Social Forum [39]"  
(3 February 2005)

Solana Larsen, "The WSF in search of itself [40]" (25 January 2006)

## **Blogging the WSF**

In an unequal world, civil-society participation often offers the best, sometimes the only, means by which women can make their voice heard. Yet, as this report indicates, the process remains problematic. So, in an attempt to redress some of their own male bias, **openDemocracy** are sending me to Nairobi to critique the World Social Forum from a woman's perspective [41].

These are the questions I hope to be able to answer: What do the women of Africa have to say? What are their main struggles and alternatives for the future?

- To what extent has a process of "engendering" taken place in the organisation, content and dialogue of the WSF?
- How far have African women's concerns been taken into account in the G8 lobby preparation process and discourse?

In addition, I shall be looking for African women who might be prepared to:

- contribute articles to **openDemocracy** on what the G8 (or anyone else) should or shouldn't be proposing for Africa
- participate in an alternative discussion to that proposed by Angela Merkel with African (male) leaders: an open summit on women for Africa, to be facilitated by **openDemocracy**

## Whose responsibility?

In his testimony to the WSF gender report, Candido Grzybowski [42], director of Ibase [43] and WSF director, disagrees with the analysis of Musa and Oloo as to where the blame lies. "Women are a 'minority' created by ourselves within civil society. With respect to that, there is no point in blaming capitalism, neo-liberalism, globalisation, exclusionary states, etc. This is a major problem that is engendered, developed, and maintained in the culture of civil society itself."

While I'm busy blogging in Nairobi, I should like to invite readers, both male and female, to comment on that. And there's no need to worry, I'm taking my mace spray with me. I'll be back!

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### Source URL:

[http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-fifty/wsf\\_4257.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-fifty/wsf_4257.jsp)

### Links:

- [1] <http://wsf2007.org/world-social-forum-nairobi-2007>
- [2] <http://www.weforum.org/en/index.htm>
- [3] <http://www.fsmmali.org/article%2070.html?lang=en>
- [4] <http://www.world-citizenship.org/word/index.php/wp-archive/323>
- [5] <http://www.ipsterraviva.net/tv/karachi/viewstory.asp?idnews=485>
- [6] [http://asp.wlv.ac.uk/Level6.asp?UserType=7&Level6=2607 target=\\_blank](http://asp.wlv.ac.uk/Level6.asp?UserType=7&Level6=2607 target=_blank)
- [7] [http://www.patriciadaniel.org.uk/ target=\\_blank](http://www.patriciadaniel.org.uk/ target=_blank)
- [8] <http://womenwsf.wordpress.com/>
- [9] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa\\_democracy/mali\\_3531.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa_democracy/mali_3531.jsp)
- [10] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa\\_democracy/africa\\_panel\\_3790.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa_democracy/africa_panel_3790.jsp)
- [11] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa\\_democracy/masculinity\\_UN\\_4058.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa_democracy/masculinity_UN_4058.jsp)
- [12] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa\\_democracy/technology\\_liberation\\_4124.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa_democracy/technology_liberation_4124.jsp)
- [13] <http://msupress.msu.edu/bookTemplate.php?bookID=3705>
- [14] <http://wsf2007.org/Gendering%20the%20WSF%202007%20Process.doc>
- [15] <http://demokrasia-kenya.blogspot.com/>
- [16] [http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read\\_article.php?articleId=162](http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=162)
- [17] <http://un.org/Depts/dhl/violence/>
- [18] <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/38952>
- [19] <http://www.femnet.or.ke/>
- [20] [http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/where\\_we\\_work/drc/rape.htm](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/where_we_work/drc/rape.htm)
- [21] <http://www.wombles.org.uk/article200611527.php>
- [22] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/01a1136a-5ed6-11db-afac-0000779e2340.html>
- [23] <http://runningafrica.com/news-01052007My-Country.html>
- [24] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-trade\\_economy\\_justice/g8\\_3708.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-trade_economy_justice/g8_3708.jsp)
- [25] <http://www.dissentnetwork.org/>
- [26] [http://www.friedenskooperative.de/g8\\_2007e.htm](http://www.friedenskooperative.de/g8_2007e.htm)
- [27] <http://www.attac.de/heiligendamm07/>
- [28] <http://www.g8-2007.de/content/view/17/11/lang,en/>
- [29] <http://wiki.dissentnetwork.org/wiki/Hauptseite>
- [30] <http://wiki.dissentnetwork.org/wiki/FrauenLesbenTransgender-Vernetzung>
- [31] <http://www.ewnw.de/>
- [32] <http://un.org/millenniumgoals/>
- [33] <http://www.marchemondiale.org/>
- [34] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/article\\_263.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/article_263.jsp)
- [35] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/article\\_906.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/article_906.jsp)
- [36] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/article\\_926.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/article_926.jsp)

- [37] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/article\\_1670.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/article_1670.jsp)  
[38] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/article\\_1690.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/article_1690.jsp)  
[39] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/article\\_2330.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/article_2330.jsp)  
[40] [http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/wsf\\_3211.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/wsf_3211.jsp)  
[41] <http://womenwsf.wordpress.com/>  
[42] <http://www.g05.org/en/menu/who/organizersGrzybowski.php>  
[43] <http://www.fdcw.unimaas.nl/personal/WebSitesMWT/Box/towardsforumameur.pdf>



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