

## **Framing across differences, building solidarities: lessons from women's rights activism in transnational spaces<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the discursive strategies of contemporary transnational feminist and women's activists in their efforts to manage intramovement diversity. While ideological, strategic, and identity differences within movements are often studied at the local level, I advance this scholarship by undertaking an investigation of intramovement difference that makes central the concerns of a highly diverse, globalized social movement. Drawing on evidence collected through participant observation at three major transnational activist conferences, I use a narrative approach to document key facets of intramovement difference in the contemporary context, and show how activists are employing collective action frames as tools in their efforts to mitigate differences and build solidarities. I find that rights-based frames, oppositional frames, and internally focused frames are all utilized by activists to foster a sense of shared struggle. Such frames encompass a wide range of ideas and are not confined to particular issues or locales. Additionally, they are often deployed in conjunction with acknowledgements of intramovement differences and/or references to diversity as an explicit movement strength.*

### **Introduction and background**

In recent years, framing activity in contentious politics has attracted increasing attention and enthusiasm from researchers of social movements (Benford and Snow 2000; Croteau and Hicks 2003; Johnston and Noakes 2005; Snow 2004). The important role of collective action frames in movement emergence, development, and outcomes is now well documented and widely recognized in the field (Benford and Snow 2000; Cress and Snow 2000; Gamson 1992; McCammon et al. 2007; Zuo and Benford 1995).<sup>2</sup> Another more recent trend in movement

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<sup>2</sup> Framing refers to the meaning, or "signifying," work in which movement actors engage. Snow and Benford (1988) write that "they frame, or assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (198).

scholarship is the explosion of interest in the dynamics of transnational social movements (della Porta et al. 2006; Juris 2008; Khagram, Riker and Sikkink 2002; Moghadam 2009; Smith 2002, 2008; Tarrow 2005). Researchers have utilized existing theoretical tools and worked to develop new ones to deepen our understanding of social movements that cross boundaries of nation, culture, religion, race, and class. This paper examines the convergence of these two vital topics through a study of framing dynamics within the contemporary transnational women's movement. While ideological, strategic, and identity differences within movements are most often studied at the local level (Levitsky 2007; Reger 2002; White 1999), I advance this scholarship by undertaking an investigation of intramovement difference that makes central the concerns of a highly diverse, globalized social movement. I consider how activists confront intramovement differences in their interactions with one another in transnational spaces and, further, how they employ collective action frames in the process. Such lines of investigation have important implications for solidarity in transnational movements and also for feminist theory and action.

As feminists and women's activists across the globe have engaged in diverse forms of collective protest, they have also necessarily confronted the same rocky terrain of intersectionalities and multiple identities with which feminist theorists have grappled (Mendoza 2002; Mohanty 2003; Moya 2001; Narayan 1997; Santiago 2004; Spivak 1999). Such differences continually threaten to splinter women's movements, yet many activists remain committed to finding paths to solidarity. Movement actors have repeatedly disrupted significant boundaries and negotiated cultural, racial, national, religious, sexual, and material differences, ultimately achieving what Manisha Desai (2005) has called "solidarities of difference." The development of strategic discourses, or frames, that connect seemingly disparate issues, such as violence against women, economic development, sexual identity, and militarism has been a vital piece of this process, but to date we have little systematic evidence demonstrating how discursive practices are implicated.

Reitan's (2007) examination of global activism illustrates the continued and often overlooked importance of identity solidarity in transnational social movements. Reitan criticizes scholars who have lauded reciprocal solidarity – relationships of mutual support – at the expense of what she views as the still crucial role of shared identity categories in motivating and sustaining mass-based movement action, particularly in the context of neoliberal globalization. She writes:

Complex transnational movements today are comprised of identity, reciprocal, and altruistic solidarities alike, in different mixes towards different outcomes. But, perhaps more importantly, the identity solidarity that forms the foundation of contemporary, mass transnational networks is decidedly not reducible to "worker,"... It is based upon concrete identities – debtor, peasant, indigenous, youth, woman, and, indeed, worker – that have been activated as political due to their being

threatened in some concrete way by neoliberal globalization touching down in a specific place (55-56).

Taking seriously the insights offered by Reitan and Desai requires us to consider how the identity of "woman" can be activated, shared, and sustained in the face of external threats, even while resisting the homogenization that many feminist scholars and activists fear. An analysis of the discursive practices of women's movement actors promises to shed light on this issue.

My analysis, then, centers on the following question: How, in the face of tremendous intramovement differences, are transnational women's movements using collective action frames as discursive tools in their efforts to manage contestation and build consensus? My endeavor is to highlight the role of frames in constructing relations of solidarity that begin with the threatened identity of "woman," but that simultaneously take into account the multiplicities inherent in that identity.<sup>3</sup>

I argue here that contemporary women's movement actors continue to make concerted efforts to work with one another despite their differences, and that they utilize particular kinds of frames as tools in this process. This paper first documents the types of frames commonly deployed to transcend the differences that sometimes threaten transnational collaboration among feminist and women's organizations, and then identifies shared characteristics of those frames. To develop my arguments, I draw on evidence gathered through participant-observation during three major transnational conferences: the 2004 World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai, India, the 2007 Feminist Dialogues (FD) meetings in Nairobi, Kenya, and the 2007 World Social Forum, also in Nairobi. For several reasons, these transnational spaces of activists provide especially appropriate empirical material through which to examine the topic at hand. First, an analysis based on participant-observation of face-to-face political activism makes visible important patterns, ideas, and dynamics that cannot be captured through less engaged methods of investigation. Second, there is a tremendous amount of diversity and difference present in such venues; movement actors and organizations converge from many parts of the world and have a variety of strategies, identities, priorities, and goals. Finally, in part because of this diversity, movement organizations use these spaces to build connections with other organizations focused on global justice issues; they seek to identify and emphasize

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<sup>3</sup> Frame analysis is not the only viable approach to understanding relations of solidarity among activists. Some aspects of consensus-building are difficult to capture through the lens of frame theory, but I strive to honor the complexities of activist claims as much as possible through a feminist participatory methodology and maintain that the concept of framing is very useful for understanding how ideas are discursively packaged. I view this effort as one important, yet situated, contribution to the larger intellectual and political project of feminism.

commonalities among groups and, in so doing, rely on discourses that promote such commonality.

As Desai (2007) has pointed out, educated, privileged feminist activists are overrepresented in these transnational spaces; however, we must also recognize the ways that such spaces provide a venue for actors to make their voices heard when they have been marginalized within national-level activism.<sup>4</sup> Some of the participants who come to WSF and FD are well-networked women who frequently participate in transnational conferences, while other participants come from local, grassroots organizations that have managed to find funding in spite of having been marginalized by or shut out of their national-level movements.

This work will illustrate both the obstacles confronting movement actors as they attempt to build alliances, and also the discursive strategies they have developed and used to deal with such challenges. I begin with a brief discussion of the kinds of issues that threaten to divide feminists and women's activists in the contemporary global context; Ackerly (2008) refers to such situations as "terrains of difficulty," while Escobar (2008) has labeled these kinds of tensions "territories of difference." This discussion provides a sense of the challenges movement actors face as they seek frameworks that will both meet external movement goals and build cohesion among movement participants. I then identify and explain three particular types of frames used in attempts to transcend differences and build solidarity among movement actors: 1) oppositional frames, 2) rights-based frames, and 3) capacity-building and movement process frames. After providing examples of these discourses and the ways in which they are being employed, I conclude by laying out theoretical implications of these findings, for scholars of transnational social movements and for feminist activists and theorists.

## **Data and methods**

The data for this paper emerge from participant observation at a series of major global activist meetings, the World Social Forum and the Feminist Dialogues. Now convened biennially and attended by tens of thousands of activists, academics, policy-makers and donors, the WSF is an international conference that serves as "...an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and inter-linking 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

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<sup>4</sup> For example, some Indian activists and organizations are critical of Delhi-based feminists' dominance of national-level conversations about women's issues, and thus they find more room for their voices in transnational spaces.

imperialism, and are committed to building a society centred on the human person" (WSF Charter of Principles, <http://www.wsfindia.org/charter.php>).<sup>5</sup>

A diverse mix of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social movement organizations (SMOs), and political organizations have used the WSF as a venue to construct and disseminate radical critiques of economic globalization, war and militarism, and a range of other social issues. Feminist activists have had an increasing presence since the first WSF in Porto Alegre in 2001. Immediately prior to the Mumbai WSF in 2004, the first Feminist Dialogues meeting was held as a means of bringing together activists from around the world to discuss feminist issues and challenges, and to infuse the WSF with a gender perspective. Spearheaded primarily by a small group of transnational feminist networks (TFNs) based in the global South, the FD meetings have continued in some form at each WSF since 2004, with the exception of the 2009 WSF in Belem, Brazil.<sup>6</sup> The Feminist Dialogues describe its key objectives in this way:

In having the meeting before the WSF we hope to achieve a two-way political exchange: firstly, we hope to effectively intervene in the broader WSF process as feminists organizing for change, and to establish strategic and politically relevant links with other social movements. As a site of resistance, the WSF is one of the most dynamic spaces available to us as feminist activists and it is important to participate in it while at the same time retaining our autonomy within the FD (Feminist Dialogues 2006).

A number of prominent scholars studying global social movements and/or transnational women's activism have found the WSF and FD meetings to be an important space and source of data (Conway 2007; Desai 2006; Eschle and Maiguashca 2010; Fisher and Ponniah 2003; Reese et al. 2007; Smith 2008; Smith et al. 2007). They provide an ideal opportunity to observe and interact with many different (and differently situated) movement actors and organizations in one place, and over a relatively short period of time.

An active participant and observer in events at both the WSF and the FD, I documented my observations with extensive field notes on sessions and on informal conversations with participants/activists (Emerson 2001; Lichterman 2002). When possible, I also documented sessions using a digital voice recorder.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> From 2001 to 2005 the WSF was held annually. Beginning in 2006, the International Council made the decision to change the frequency of global meetings to every second year, in part to encourage regional and local social forum meetings during the off years.

<sup>6</sup> At the 2009 WSF, the leadership of the FD held events within the Forum, rather than convening a separate conference in advance.

<sup>7</sup> I include the disclaimer "when possible" because, as any previous attendee of the WSF knows, sessions often take place outdoors in a tent or stadium with substantial background noise (e.g., drums, music, speeches), making it very difficult to hear clearly.

My participatory approach to studying feminist activism within these transnational spaces enabled me to observe closely the discursive strategies of women's organizations. Attending to the speech of panelists and audience members, I was able to note and appreciate differences and tensions among groups, and how these differences were rendered visible through different ways of talking about issues. In 2004 I attended 16 sessions at the WSF in Mumbai, India; in 2007 in Nairobi I attended 13.<sup>8</sup> I observed the speech of plenary speakers, panelists at smaller sessions, and also the questions and comments of audience members, many of whom provided information about their organizational affiliation and/or the political and cultural context of their activism. I particularly noted the use of frames coupled with acknowledgements of intramovement differences in order to discern the types of frames commonly used as tools in addressing the management of diversity and the building of consensus.

There are literally hundreds of sessions one might attend during the forum, and often well over 30 options available during any given time slot. Some sessions are quite large, have ample seating, involve one or more high-profile speakers sitting at a table with microphones; these types of sessions do not lend themselves well to questions and discussion. At the other end of the spectrum, many sessions are small, informal, and conducive to group discussion. Reviewing the WSF programs in advance, I selected sessions to attend based on their engagement with issues of sex, gender, sexuality, feminisms and transnational activism, and gave particular preference to those that explicitly dealt with transnational collaboration, engagement with global governance institutions, or the challenges of intramovement differences.

I attended the Feminist Dialogues meeting only in 2007;<sup>9</sup> the sessions, consisting of plenary panels, small group breakouts, and open forums took place during the three days immediately preceding the World Social Forum in Nairobi. The FD meetings are organized differently than the WSF in that there are not multiple options for sessions to attend during any given time slot; rather, all participants attended the same plenary sessions, and were then divided into small groups for breakout discussions. In some cases, each of the small groups discussed the same topic; in others, different topics were assigned to each small group. After each breakout session, the small groups reported back to the larger whole through one person who had been elected as the spokesperson. Over the course of the three

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<sup>8</sup> A listing of session titles and sponsoring organizations is included in Appendix A.

<sup>9</sup> The year 2004 marked the first meeting of the Feminist Dialogues. It was an "invitation-only" event in which invited parties included mostly well-established organizations and individual activists who had at least loose pre-existing connections with one another; I was not invited to participate. Subsequent FD meetings in 2005 and 2007 required participants to make application in advance to be guaranteed a spot, but the proceedings were otherwise relatively open. Interestingly, though, participants were asked to indicate that they self-identified as "feminist."

days, there were a total of seven large group/plenary sessions, two open microphone sessions that included the entire group, and three small group discussion sessions.

For my analysis, I draw on the evidence present in my field notes and recordings, which document my participant-observation of the 2004 and 2007 World Social Forums and the 2007 Feminist Dialogues meetings. The field notes for these three events exceeded eighty pages, and the recordings totaled approximately 27 hours. I began the coding process by examining my notes and recordings for instances of activists' frame utilization, but in addition I looked for references to intramovement differences or tensions. Although I anticipated the presence of frames such as human rights and democracy based on my pre-existing knowledge of the movement, I did not begin the coding process with a formal list of codes; rather, I allowed codes to emerge from the data (Charmaz 2006). Since my driving question deals with frames being employed with the intent of mitigating differences, I especially noted instances in which speakers both employed a collective action frame *and* made reference to intramovement differences or, more specifically, collaboration across or in spite of differences. These references to intramovement differences often appeared as mentions of "local particularities" or "our different experiences."

Beginning with the earliest set of notes and moving chronologically through them, I scrutinized my entire set of notes a total of four times, and then re-visited particular sections as appropriate to ensure the utmost care and precision. While I took note of the number of instances of different types of frames and mentions of intramovement differences, I do not rely heavily on the precise frequency of usage (i.e., specific counts of usage) because of the nature of the data source. Note taking in the field is not a perfect representation of all the speech that occurs in a given session (particularly considering occasional language barriers and hearing difficulties in these venues); therefore, I cannot be confident in a total count of frames used in the sessions. Rather, I rely on a more general estimation of prevalence in my presentation of the evidence (i.e., a frame was frequently used, or not frequently used). The categories of frames that I discuss were present repeatedly and used by multiple activists throughout my field notes; while other frames were present in the data, they were not used as widely or with the intent of addressing intramovement differences, which, again, is the central theme of the analysis.

### **Sources of intramovement division and the need for shared frames**

Historically, many of the intramovement differences emphasized in feminist scholarship stem from regional identities and experiences, intersecting with issues of class and race/ethnicity (Antrobus 2004; Hill Collins 1990; Mohanty 1991;

Narayan 1997). These facets of difference are still present, and still constitute significant concerns for movement actors; however, in the contemporary global context, other sources of difference have also emerged that require theoretical, ethical and strategic consideration. While I do not attempt to provide an exhaustive list, I briefly outline below some of the key tensions voiced by activists: positions on neoliberal global capital, generational schism, sexuality, feminist identity, and local/global status and resource differences.<sup>10</sup>

The first concern deals with the orientation of movement actors toward capitalism and neoliberal globalization. While most women's activists are critical of the global market economy and its negative impact on women, some advocate a complete dismantling of the capitalist system while others see themselves as working from a feminist perspective to critique and hopefully reform a largely unmovable system that is not likely to be toppled in the foreseeable future. The most radical perspectives consider any attempt to reform or work within the neoliberal framework as using "the master's tools" (Lorde 1984), and thus doomed to fail. Those with more moderate perspectives tend to voice concern about what happens to people while they "wait for the revolution." In some instances, as INFORM executive director Sunila Abeysekera explained at the 2007 Feminist Dialogues, women's groups have found such different strategic approaches to be virtually insurmountable; movement actors in the moderate camp may view the more radical actors as unrealistic and unnecessarily rigid in their thinking, while the radical groups sometimes view their counterparts as selling out. Over time, these kinds of differences can result in the growth of resentment on both sides, ultimately preventing continued dialogue due to hard feelings.<sup>11</sup>

Another wedge that is particularly salient for some women concerns generational conflicts. Many young feminists feel that veteran feminists are dismissive of and patronizing toward their ideas. This problem was quite visible at the 2005 meetings of the Feminist Dialogues when less experienced activists were pressured to serve as rapporteurs for the small group breakout sessions; a number of the younger participants felt silenced and undervalued, and were subsequently resentful.<sup>12</sup> Although efforts were made at the 2007 FD meetings to remedy this tension, the generational issue loomed in the background. Several young women voiced dissatisfaction with what they perceived as ongoing exclusion or

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<sup>10</sup> These facets of difference were raised repeatedly at the sessions I observed during my work in the field, and many have also been documented in recent scholarship on transnational women's movements (Antrobus 2004; Basu 2000; Conway 2008; Hawthorne 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Conway (2008) mentions a similar challenging dynamic between two prominent transnational networks, the World March of Women and *Articulaci3n Feminista Marcosur*.

<sup>12</sup> I did not attend the 2005 Feminist Dialogues Meeting, which was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil. My knowledge of the dynamics at this meeting comes from conversations with colleagues who did attend, and from secondary accounts of the event (e.g., Desai 2006; Wilson 2007).



marginalization. One Senegalese activist expressed her continuing concern that the "old guard" is "dominating the discourse of feminism" and has generally failed to link with the new generation of feminist leaders. Given that many seasoned feminist activists share a long history of transnational collaboration and struggle (dating in some cases back to the 1970s), it is not surprising that their tight networks might appear impenetrable to movement newcomers. But what the veteran feminists understand as trust and community with one another, younger feminists sometimes interpret as unreflective exclusion of fresh perspectives in order to retain power within the movement.<sup>13</sup> It is not necessarily the case that veteran feminists hold vastly different perspectives on issues than the younger feminists, but rather that they are being perceived as controlling, and crowding out new voices from the conversation. The older activists remain concerned about the schism, though, and continue to discuss it openly (e.g., Shah 2004).

It is also widely acknowledged that the notion of sexual rights remains contested among women's movement actors; while autonomous sexual decision-making is widely discussed, sexual identity is still a source of disagreement. For example, Ackerly and D'Costa (2005) document tensions around the inclusion of sexual freedom in the women's human rights framework. They quote a WSF 2004 attendee from Burkina Faso who is active with the World March of Women:

For me, feminism means that I commit myself, with all of my force, with all of my faith, in the struggle so that women succeed in this endeavor... Nonetheless, we've had the time to ascertain that feminism, it means that we have to agree that everything is allowed, and I think that, here on earth, everything is not allowed... But we realized that, in the World March, there is something called sexual orientation. And we, we are not ready to commit ourselves to fight, to ask for the authorization to have a sexual orientation other than what one normally has. I am talking about homosexuality. Whether it is right or not, for us, this is a difficult situation. It is not one of our primary concerns (26).

Her comments reflect palpable tensions and discomfort around women's sexual freedom that often stem from differences in religion, culture, and education. And while her voice represents the beliefs of a legitimate segment of the women's movement, others articulate a different perspective. Gigi Francisco of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) enthusiastically chanted at a 2007 WSF session, "Sex whenever I want! Sex with whoever I want! Pregnancy whenever I decide! Respect our sexualities!" Her arguments suggest a more holistic view of women's sexual autonomy that would enable women to exercise full agency, free from cultural or legal constraint, in determining the gender and sexual identity of their partners as well as the frequency and purpose of their sexual activity.

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<sup>13</sup> Whittier (1995) describes a similar phenomenon occurring among generational cohorts during the second wave of feminist activism in the U.S.

Also note that the activist quoted above interprets sexuality as a North-South difference, but her analysis represents only a partial account of this landscape. Many women and organizations in the global South have long advocated for an expansion in understandings of sexual freedoms and rights, such that same-sex relationships would not be viewed as deviant. One South African activist with the Coalition of African Lesbians expressed her dismay at the prejudice her organization encounters when trying to build alliances both locally and transnationally. A number of lesbians also report that they still feel marginalized within other global justice movements, including feminist ones. They feel that their issues are not taken as seriously, and are troubled at the unwillingness of some to include sexuality as a human rights issue.<sup>14</sup> Hawthorne (2007) discusses lesbians' experiences of marginalization even at the World Social Forum itself, writing that "so too in this 'new world' of diversity, lesbians have been pushed off the tree" (130).

Another interesting theoretical and political fault line within the movement is the necessity of a feminist identity and, further, what constitutes a "feminist" perspective. Movement organizations are making different choices in this regard. Some leaders, such as the organizers of the African Feminist Forum, insist that articulation of an explicitly feminist identity is a crucial political move; the coalition of organizations responsible for putting together this event in 2006 argued that they needed to hold the forum for those who "publicly identify as feminists," not the "I'm a feminist, but..." crowd.<sup>15</sup> They noted that the feminist movement and the women's movement are not the same thing, and they viewed infusing the women's movement with a feminist perspective as an important goal of their organizing. Likewise, one South Asian activist lamented the fact that "gender" workshops are very common in her region, but that feminism and critique of patriarchy are rarely part of the discussions.

Other women's activists and organizations make the intentional choice to avoid the use of a feminist label, at least publicly. Some activists cite fears of being perceived as man-hating lesbians if they identify themselves as feminists. One South African organizational leader reported that this worry is particularly common in the African context; she noted that women want to advocate for themselves, but also to remain respected in their communities and in their marriages, and thus tend to shun any association with feminisms. In other cases, activists report that their reasons stem from cultural perceptions that feminism is a nefarious concept imported from privileged intellectuals of the West; it is not uncommon for women to note that they have greater success mobilizing and achieving their goals,

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<sup>14</sup> Several participants in the audience expressed this sentiment during a sexual diversity session hosted by the South-South Dialogue at the 2007 World Social Forum.

<sup>15</sup> The organizing coalition included representatives from DAWN, FEMNET, and WLUML, to name a few.

particularly at local and national levels, when they utilize frameworks that are accepted as indigenous. Activists are then better able to disarm political leaders because the leaders cannot claim outside imposition of ideas.

This brings us to the palpable tensions that are rooted in differences between movement organizations working at the local or national level and those working in transnational spaces (Alvarez 1998; Desai 2007). Susanna George, former executive director of Isis International, writes "There is a vast difference between the priorities of women working locally and those working in the corridors of the UN" (2004: 26). Moreover, there exists the perception, often warranted, among activists working in local and national contexts that transnational venues are dominated by women and organizations with greater privilege in terms of education, resources, and language. Margaret, a women's rights activist in Zimbabwe, shared her concern during an open microphone session at the 2007 FD that "grassroots women" face significant obstacles in getting their interests on the transnational feminist agenda. She noted that there are far too many educated English-speakers advocating on behalf of, rather than with, locally-based activists, and went on to assert that "Anything you do for us, without us, is against us."

Taken together, these types of differences and tensions present very real challenges for alliance-building and, more specifically, for constructing appropriate frames geared toward this goal. But particularly in transnational spaces, feminists and women's activists are looking to find ways of building bridges and working together (Eschle 2005; Hewitt and Karides forthcoming; Vargas 2003). As Nandita Shah noted in a speech delivered during a plenary session of the Asia Pacific NGO forum for Beijing Plus Ten, "In these fragmented times, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003: 250) writes, it is both very difficult to build these alliances and never more important to do so" (Shah 2004).

A number of movement scholars have cited the heightened importance of "meaning work" in transnational social movements (della Porta et al. 2006; Nepstad 2001; Smith 2002; Snow 2004). Ironically, the characteristics of globalized movements that make shared meanings so crucial are also the very features that make their creation so difficult. Della Porta et al. (2006) identify three such facets of transnational movements: the heterogeneity of movement constituencies, the heterogeneity of ideologies and political positions represented by mobilizing structures, and the geographically dispersed mobilization context. The transnational women's movement faces these broad challenges of heterogeneity and geographic dispersion, as well as the more movement-specific challenges discussed above, in their discursive efforts to promote solidarity. Despite these challenges, as I show, feminists and women's activists continue to call for unifying discourses and to work thoughtfully to construct and utilize them.

Feminist scholar-activist Rosalind Petchesky (2008) argues that we need a feminism that coalesces very diverse bodies; she asserts that discourses effective in

promoting solidarity within a movement full of multiplicity must be intersectional, integrative, and able to encompass local particularities. Ayesha Imam, feminist scholar and organizer with Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), made a similar point at the Feminist Dialogues in 2007, insisting that if feminists are to take on issues together, the issues must be ones that all can “get behind” in their local particularities. Gigi Francisco of DAWN echoed her sentiment and called for integrated feminist approaches: “We must commit to interlinkages despite our differential locations” (FD small group session). Few would argue with the need for such strategies, but developing and implementing them is often difficult. Lydia Alpízar Durán, executive director of the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID), underscored this point in her identification of the sweeping post-millennium political and economic changes as one of the great challenges of the contemporary period (FD small group session). She went on to note the urgent need for developing new frameworks to accommodate current issues and their intersectionalities. Women’s groups, then, must adapt their framing practices appropriately to accommodate both internal differences and rapid changes in the movement environment.

Constructing shared frames that account for the kinds of differences, intersections, and particularities discussed above is fraught with obstacles of one kind or another. Consider the example of the politics surrounding access to abortion in different regional contexts. In Latin America, many feminists and women’s activists have fought locally and regionally for women’s access to safe abortion; as activist Nandita Gandhi shared at the 2007 FD, many activists in India have instead struggled with the wide availability of abortion because of the growing number of selective terminations of female fetuses. A frame that is effective transnationally needs to be able to account for these complex situational differences around the issue of abortion, affirming the specific problems in each context, but also maintaining theoretical coherence.

In addition to situational strategic differences, unifying frames must also recognize material and identity differences among women. In the mid-1980s, the theme of “global sisterhood” (Morgan 1984) was temporarily taken up by some transnational feminists and women’s activists as a rallying cry, but was quickly critiqued for its universalizing character and its perceived erasing of differences in race, class, and nation that intersect to create disparate lived experiences for women across the world. Third World feminists, in particular, were concerned that Morgan’s notion of women’s commonality required that women’s race and class be rendered invisible (Mohanty 1997); these pointed critiques prevented the global sisterhood frame from gaining and sustaining broad-based support within the movement. Thus, women’s groups learned that collective action frames that effectively manage difference must not attempt to hide it, but rather should acknowledge and move through it.

Keck and Sikkink's (1998) account of networking around the issue of violence against women demonstrates how the emergence of a shared frame – women's rights as human rights – led to effective collaboration and management of intramovement differences within transnational feminism during the early 1990s. Though women's and feminist activists converged around this common collective action frame by the mid-1980s, relationships between activists from the global North and South were somewhat tumultuous prior to that. Major divisions at that time were attributed largely to disparate understandings of the most pressing issues facing women. While Northern activists tended to use an anti-discrimination/equality frame, Southern activists relied primarily on a frame of economic development/social justice. Southern activists were highly critical of what they viewed as elitist ignorance of their material concerns on the part of some Northern leaders; critiques of imperialism and racism were central to their arguments. The women's human rights frame, coupled with a focus on this issue of violence against women (broadly understood), effectively bridged the gap in priorities and conceptual understandings among women's organizations at that historical and political moment. Weldon (2006) adds that the human rights frame really only became successful once all forms of violence against women – not just those perpetrated by the state – became accepted within the movement as rights violations; she credits Southern activists for expanding Northern perspectives on this issue. Thus, making the frame as broad and inclusive as possible was a crucial step in successfully mitigating difference.

Since the UN conferences of the 1990s, transnational women's organizers have branched out in their strategies, still highly aware of past missteps that fragmented the movement, but also fervently seeking common ground. Nandita Shah, co-director of Akshara India, reflects on the legacies of the past and provides a succinct and clear account of the strategic challenges of the contemporary movement in this way:

We started with a simple and easy analysis: women because they were women, shared social discrimination and oppression, in different degrees perhaps, were linked by a common bond of oppression and struggle. Life in the movement was much easier then. We had a neat analysis and uncomplicated strategies... The women's movement has made an important radical shift. We shifted from notions of sisterhood is global, one women's movement, one category of women to recognizing the politics of difference. That woman, as a biological being, is not the only identity. That for each of us there are multiple, layered, often contradictory identities. The multiple identities appear, disappear or assert themselves at different times in different situations... How can we evolve a common vision without subsuming our specificity and without giving up our differences? How can we assert collective power in a different way and not only through our oppressed identities? (2004: 1-2).

One session at the 2007 World Social Forum in Nairobi further confirmed both the continued importance and the challenges of developing shared frames in contemporary transnational organizing. The session, entitled "Feminist Movement

Building," was exclusively devoted to strategizing around a (potentially new) transnational slogan or campaign that would have broad appeal, but that women's activists could implement in different ways at the local level in order to attend to the specificities of situations. I was struck at this session by the intense consternation around specific word choices and the criteria used for assessing the quality of these messages. For instance, some suggestions that dealt with the need for education were criticized for being too issue-specific and not "cross-cutting" in nature. Other ideas were rejected for fear that their similarity to slogans of other movements might be confusing. The facilitators pushed hard to come to some consensus by the end of the session, so that the women's organizations and leaders present could leave the WSF having co-constructed a message that could be put into action in diverse settings. However, there was no ultimate consensus, no crescendo.

As my anecdote illustrates, thinking through appropriate and effective discursive approaches to consensus-building in the face of diversity is a crucial concern (and a challenge) for transnational women's movements in the contemporary context. Thus, the importance of the question is affirmed: How can movement actors construct frames and identities in a way that promotes solidarity, not giving way to these divisions, strategic or otherwise, but at the same time respecting the variations in positions?

### **Collective action frames as tools for managing differences**

In the sections that follow, I lay out three categories of frames being utilized by contemporary women's movements to promote unity among diversely situated actors and organizations. The data reveal that activists in transnational spaces are commonly using oppositional or "anti" frames, rights-based frames, and movement process/capacity-building frames (internally focused frames) in their solidarity efforts. The popularity of diagnostic discourses such as anti-globalization and anti-fundamentalism rose dramatically in the new millennium, and have been particularly popular among global justice activists participating in the World Social Forum in recent years (DAWN 2004; Reed 2002). Multi-issue frames arguing for human rights have been widely utilized in transnational women's movements for many years (Friedman 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1998). By contrast, process-oriented frames focusing on solidarity and movement-building have only recently become more common, and may in fact be a favored approach in the current moment.

## Oppositional frames

At a 2004 World Social Forum workshop sponsored by Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), one India-based activist asserted that “anti-fundamentalism is what unites us [feminists].” Her voice represented one of many feminists at the WSF who identified fundamentalism as a religious and political force that is harmful to women in a range of ways. This claim is significant, in part, because it is symbolic of a departure from the human rights discourse so dominant in the 1990s. While very often a commitment to human rights is characterized as the tie that has bound women in their global struggles, in the wake of resurging power among fundamentalist movements and governments (e.g. the Vatican, Iran, Sudan) in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many women’s activists were identifying commonality in their *opposition to* fundamentalism, rather than a *commitment to* human rights or justice for women (DAWN 2004; Reed 2002). Also significant about the claim is the reference to being *united*, indicating an understanding that there are differences among women, but that commonality can indeed be found.

The anti-fundamentalist frame gained momentum to some degree in the late 1990s, but in particular during the early years of the new millennium (DAWN 2004; Howland and Buergethal 2001; Reed 2002). There are several plausible and related reasons why this frame became widely used when it did. First, in the aftermath of the 1995 UN World Conference on Women, many activists felt that feminist concerns had been compartmentalized to the point that building coalitions across issues and cultures was once again very difficult. The Beijing Platform for Action divided women’s issues into “critical areas of concern” which arguably impeded the potential for coalition-building.<sup>16</sup> The anti-fundamentalist frame offered a means of uniting women across cultures, across borders, and across issues of concern. In many cases, the anti-fundamentalist frame also offered a point of convergence for feminists and women’s groups and other progressive causes concerned with militarization, neoliberal economic policies, and sexual rights. Second, the concurrent political success of fundamentalist groups<sup>17</sup> all over the world created a sense of solidarity among feminists that they were battling the same kinds of forces, in spite of other differences. Moreover, the attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001 gave rise to a heightened awareness of religious fundamentalism, which further catalyzed galvanization around this issue for feminists.

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<sup>16</sup> Ackerly (2006) dubs these “issue silos.”

<sup>17</sup> Examples include the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, the Bush administration in the U.S., and the power of the Vatican in international politics.

The anti-fundamentalism frame and other diagnostic framing strategies,<sup>18</sup> namely those critiquing neoliberalism and militarization, have also enjoyed popularity due to their promotion on the part of women's coalitions such as the coordinating group of the Feminist Dialogues. The "trinity" of women's enemies – religious fundamentalism, neoliberal globalization, and militarization – figured prominently into their conference agendas during 2004, 2005, and 2007 (FD Global Report 2005; FD Global Report 2007; FD 2007 Concept Notes on Sub-Theme 2: Fundamentalism and Body Politics, and 3: Globalisation). Furthermore, the contemporary global justice movement more generally, including the large portion of it that participates in the World Social Forum, has advanced the anti-neoliberalism and anti-militarization arguments as key bases for their collaborative organizing (Blau and Karides 2008; della Porta et al. 2006; Fisher and Ponniah 2003; Smith 2008).

What characterizes these "anti" discourses is their sole focus on the enemy, the problem. Essentially, these are diagnostic frames that do not move to the next step; movement actors can identify common enemies without explicitly suggesting or agreeing upon common solutions. While "anti" frames may be used in conjunction with, rather than exclusive of, prognostic and/or motivational frames, combinations can vary substantially; diagnostic frames may be paired with reform-oriented prognoses or with more radical prognoses, for instance. Diagnostic frames, though, are particularly visible in efforts to promote a sense of shared suffering and solidarity, even if differently manifested, as I observed repeatedly at the transnational conferences of 2004 and 2007.

During both the 2004 and 2007 meetings, opposition to militarization was a dominant message. At an open forum discussion following a session at the 2007 FD, one participant noted that although militarization has different meanings and realities for individuals depending on the context, many women and children are harmed by this phenomenon. She remarked that women regularly face violations as a result of multiple forms of military power, whether through witnessing violence, losing loved ones, or having one's own bodily security threatened. Her comment conveyed a sense that, even though the precise effects of war and militarization vary, there is a common root of people's suffering which can be the basis for solidarity.

Neoliberal globalization is also targeted as a ubiquitous obstacle to women's flourishing. During a session on the opening day of the 2007 FD, a number of participants shared their local experiences with neoliberal forces. One Brazilian-

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<sup>18</sup> Diagnostic and prognostic framing are two of the core framing tasks outlined by Snow and Benford (1988). Diagnostic framing refers to the identification of the problem or the injustice at hand along with its causes, while prognostic framing refers to the presentation of a solution to the problem. *Who* is labeled as the enemy and *how* to attack the problem are both highly important and often contentious features of frames.



based activist with *Articulación Feminista Marcosur* discussed the negative impact of neoliberal globalization on unemployment and inequality in Latin America, and also criticized the transfer of social responsibilities from the public to the private sphere. She went on to argue that feminism means nothing without a redistribution of wealth, a virtually impossible goal within the confines of a neoliberal economy.

In a later session, one FD participant lamented that “Neoliberalism spoiled our way of thinking about the future.” Another participant pointed to the exacerbation of health problems for HIV-positive women in South Africa who are unemployed because their jobs have been filled by Chinese women working for next to nothing. A Latin American woman currently working as an activist in South Africa emphasized the different manifestations of the neoliberal economy, but also its pervasive nature, calling it a “giant.”

On the last day of the FD meetings, the references to commonalities in facing neoliberalism continued. One panelist explained that the impact of economic globalization is complex, and that the neoliberal economy is also a source of creation of culture that affects us all; on a more hopeful note, she argued that there are many forms of resistance to neoliberalism in which feminists can engage, including demanding land and water rights or questioning the role of the state in national economies, and she encouraged each woman to find her role in the collective struggle.

Throughout these transnational meetings, women attributed a wide range of problems to the giant that is neoliberal globalization, and pointed repeatedly to the devastation it has caused for women’s economic opportunities. And lest we fall into the trap of separating material issues from so-called identity issues, several South African lesbian activists noted the ways that sexual freedom is located squarely within struggles against neoliberalism and patriarchy. They argued forcefully that the intersecting enemies of neoliberalism, patriarchy, and fundamentalism come together to diminish the life chances of LBT women in developing countries, in particular.

One clear strategic advantage of frames that are solely diagnostic is that they do not require consensus about solutions, or even necessarily issue priorities. There is far more agreement that fundamentalisms, militarization, and neoliberal globalization are problematic for women than there is on what to do about them; Smith (2002) also found this to be true within global justice movements generally. Ayesha Imam’s statement about coming together when/where enemies are common highlights this advantage. Focusing on the problem or the enemy provides a clear indication as to when groups should even try to collaborate, and when they should not. Furthermore, a focus on problems enables activists to express disappointment, frustration, grief, and even rage at the targets they have identified as responsible for their situations; although some might question the productivity

of these emotional expressions, at least in backstage venues they seem to promote meaningful connections among women who otherwise might not come together. Shared diagnoses make clear the shared threatened identity (Reitan 2007).

But for some, these types of frames suffer from an inherent flaw: they fail to articulate what a movement is *for*. The future of a broad movement for social change may be worrisome if participants find that they are only able to collaborate around what they are *against*. If movement actors cannot successfully articulate shared solutions to the problems they identify, they may leave themselves open to criticism from opponents, political leaders, and the public, and thus potentially risk the outcomes they desire; such challenges may be especially problematic as movements seek to gain favorable media attention for their causes.<sup>19</sup> This concern is often extended to the global justice more generally, which has also encountered difficulties coming to consensus on alternative visions to neoliberal globalization (Bello 2007). On the one hand, oppositional frames may serve an important function insofar as they promote dialogue and connection. On the other hand, if commonality can only be found in enemies, the possibility of collaboration in working toward solutions seems tenuous at best.

### **Rights-based frames**

One prominent coalescing framing strategy that the global women's movement has been using for many years, and continues to use, is the broad, intersectional, rights-based frame (Ackerly 2008; Friedman 1995; Hawkesworth 2006; Keck and Sikkink 1998). Unlike the oppositional frames discussed above, rights frames offer a prognosis. Human rights and women's rights frames encompass a wide range of issues and goals, and are thus likely to garner broad support and diminish the visibility of internal differences. Movement groups working on issues such as trade, peace, education, gender-based violence, sexuality, or climate change can easily find nodes of connection. Democracy and justice frames are sometimes used in similar ways, but not with the same prevalence as rights frames.<sup>20</sup> It is feasible to frame many, if not all, women's concerns as rights violations. Rights-based frames embody what Keck and Sikkink (1998) refer to as "languages that cannot be rejected"; these frames offer claims that are difficult for people to argue with, whether inside or outside of the movement. Such frames were prevalent among individuals and organizations in the transnational activist spaces I observed.

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<sup>19</sup> Such criticisms have been levied against the recent Occupy Wall Street protests in the U.S.

<sup>20</sup> It is possible that other prognostic frames, so long as they are adequately broad, could be used in the service of promoting solidarity. However, based on the formal and informal discussions I observed and participated in, no other prognostic frame's usage approached the prevalence of rights frames as a means of managing differences. Hence, my claims are limited to the usage of rights-based frames, rather than prognostic frames more generally.

For example, in a WSF session focusing on local impact and implementation of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR) affirmed the usefulness of a human rights approach across issues, regions, and political contexts. Panelists included activists working in the areas of sexual rights, maternal health, and HIV/AIDS, in countries such as Bangladesh, Ghana, and Zimbabwe. Each person discussed her/his organization's efforts to use the MDGs in their work, and all noted the shared challenges of fighting for women's sexual health and rights across their different contexts. Furthermore, in the materials disseminated at the session, the WGNRR pointed to the rights protected in the MDGs as a means of holding governments accountable, and also of promoting cross-cultural and cross-institutional dialogue. They advanced the rights-based approach as holistic, integrative framework: "WGNRR seeks to integrate women's sexual and reproductive rights at all levels and therefore supports involvement in broad coalitions."

Similarly, at a DAWN-sponsored panel on democracy and rights, representatives from multiple issue sectors and regions of the world spoke of the importance of protecting women's rights, particularly in the realm of health and family, regardless of the different manifestations of rights violations across cultural contexts. One panelist, an obstetrician for twenty-six years, described an array of women's health problems in the African context (e.g., cultural restrictions on family planning, husbands transmitting HIV to their wives) and noted the applicability of human rights to each specific challenge. Another panelist discussed the violent punishments to which women are subjected for so-called sexual crimes in Iran. Yvonne Underhill-Sen, a Fiji-based activist, was particularly firm in her insistence that the movement must continue to push the women's rights as human rights framework, along with a core belief in interrelated rights. She stated vehemently, "We must ensure that the notion of human rights is upheld." Throughout the workshop, panelist and facilitator Gigi Francisco reiterated the need for access to human rights in multiple sectors, and the importance of rights-based strategies across all these contexts.

The rights-based frames provide a very big tent, enabling many movement actors to join in the use of common language and still feel that their priorities are receiving attention and being validated; it is not surprising, then, that they are still so commonly used in efforts to bridge intramovement differences. They also take advantage of broadly resonant themes in the global political environment (e.g., human rights, democracy, justice), which enables organizations to claim heightened legitimacy when working with one another and with powerful political actors.

But rights frames may not offer a perfect solution for dealing with internal movement differences. One potential strategic problem with rights-based frames is that they can become so dominant within the movement that they marginalize or silence those movement actors who are unable or unwilling to frame their issues

and goals in “cross-cutting” ways (Ackerly and D’Costa 2005). Even if the original intent is inclusive, the fact remains that some groups may be left out because of their failure to embrace the dominant message based in indivisible rights. My earlier anecdote of the strategy session illustrated such a marginalization. There were a number of participants who made forceful arguments about the importance of education or the environment as underlying issues that link firmly to many other women’s concerns. In each instance, these participants’ ideas were politely (or not so politely) dismissed; the reason cited was that these more specific, issue-based frames were not broad enough to encompass the range of local particularities confronting women transnationally. The moderators seemed to want a discursive approach *like* a human rights frame in terms of broad, local and global applicability, but also something new, and perhaps unique, to add to their toolboxes. We must consider, then, what the unintended effects of privileging rights-based frames might be for consensus-building within the movement.

Another potential disadvantage to these types of frames is that their meanings can easily be diluted and/or co-opted, or can be highly contested within the movement.<sup>21</sup> Sonia Correa, DAWN research coordinator for sexual and reproductive rights, discussed the co-optation problem during a session at the 2004 WSF. Correa highlights the ongoing struggle between the women’s movement and political opponents over the meaning of human rights:

...feminists have never taken human rights for granted from start. We have entered the human rights discourse understanding it is a contextual situation, and we have struggled within it to infuse it with a gender dimension. Human rights are not international law, or in a narrow interpretation of international law. It is the process through which consensus is reached in regard to what human rights are or can be. So we are talking process, we are talking movement, we are talking political action. We don’t think, as Bush administration and IMF, that human rights is rule of law, respect of property, and respect of country. This is a very different approach, and I think this is critical to call attention to.

Internal ideational contestation can also be a challenge for rights frames. It is impossible for a movement organization, much less an entire transnational movement, to come to agreement on the precise boundaries of a frame and then retain control over that meaning. For instance, as I have indicated with the above examples, many women’s and feminist activists for human rights espouse what they call an “indivisibility” approach, but this version of rights is not necessarily accepted by political actors beyond the movement, or even by all activists within the movement. Scholar-activist Rosalind Petchesky advocated for the indivisibility perspective in response to a question about the viability of the human rights frame during a DAWN-sponsored workshop at the 2004 WSF:

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<sup>21</sup> Although co-optation is not unique to rights frames, the likelihood of co-optation by power holders is far higher than for the other two types of frames highlighted in the paper, due largely to its widespread cultural resonance.

...for those of us who have used human rights language and frameworks, with this co-optation of human rights language by the right wing, my first response is to say that we approach human rights differently and we need to be saying it over and over and over again. We approach human rights from a much more comprehensive and what we call 'indivisibility' perspective. For example, on this question of sex work and human trafficking, there is no way on earth we would talk about outlawing criminal [prostitution]; we would immediately have to talk about economic and social human rights... and the conditions in neoliberal globalization, global capitalism, that have created the necessity of sex work for so many people all around the world. So, I think that distinguishes our politics. What's very complicated also though is not just that different people espouse human rights from very different perspectives, but also that different people claim the name 'feminism.' ... We need to think through how we both pluralize feminism and welcome and embrace the many feminisms, and also feel able in public spaces to air our conflicts and differences.

Petchesky's remarks simultaneously illustrate the importance of the specificity with which we understand frames, and also the varied meanings of umbrella concepts like human rights. Implicit in Petchesky's iteration of human rights is an awareness of intersectionality and a fervent belief that all rights are interconnected, but she understands the necessity of continually fighting for that meaning, both within and outside of the movement.

### **Movement process and capacity-building frames: the new rallying cry?**

I intentionally leave this internally focused category of frames for last because it is the most innovative and emergent. Furthermore, it represents an important strategic move beyond "business as usual" that I will discuss in detail after providing some concrete examples. In referring to internal focus and movement process, I am isolating a category of frames that draw attention to the need for and importance of supporting fellow activists and fostering growth in multiple sectors of the movement; I emphasize here the importance of what happens within the movement, rather than outside of it. Visible in process-oriented frames are arguments about nourishing and strengthening the movement (e.g. movement-building and networking), and that reference solidarity and inclusivity. What the messages have in common is an awareness of and attention to the ways in which movement actors work and relate to one another, not necessarily face-to-face, but more abstractly. In many cases, the concept of intramovement difference is explicitly mentioned as a strength. Also inherent in many of these expressions is an understanding that different movement actors play different roles, have different priorities, and that the broader movement needs all such actors in order to succeed. Growth and support at both the individual and organizational levels are thus implicated in these kinds of statements.

The themes of movement-building and transnational solidarity were perhaps the most consistent I encountered during the 2007 transnational meetings; in fact, of the WSF sessions I attended, movement process and building was invoked by panelists or audience members in over fifty percent of them. At feminist conferences in recent years, major portions of time – even entire days – have been devoted to conversations around investing in and building the movement, and/or to fostering solidarity.<sup>22</sup> At the Feminist Dialogues meetings and World Social Forum sessions, these themes were visible across many different sessions and organizations. This pattern stands in contrast to the rights-based and issue-based themes (e.g., health, violence) that dominated transnational women's conferences during the previous decade (Meyer and Prügl 1999; Moghadam 2005).

The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), which hosted several 2007 WSF sessions on procuring resources for women's movements, promoted the concept of movement-building as much as any organization present. Relying on the assumption that the movement is a collective effort requiring multiple kinds of actors, a key part of AWID's mission is to "strengthen the voice, impact and influence of women's rights advocates, organizations and movements internationally to effectively advance the rights of women." GROOTS International (Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood), who also had a strong presence at the 2007 WSF, shared their materials advocating the nurturing of "relationships of mutual support and solidarity among women engaged in redeveloping their communities." South African activist Fikile Vilikazi also noted the crucial importance of alliance-building and networking with one another in the contemporary context.

Nigerian-based scholar-activist Ayesha Imam (WLUML) emphasized the importance of explicitly "recognizing and reaffirming" differences of religion, language, class, and sexual orientation, and to *build on existing solidarities* when trying to bring people together around common goals. Her remarks suggest a belief in the need for mutual support and growth in spite of differences, which should be thought of as a strength. Also employing the idea of collaborative struggle, representatives from the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights noted that work in support of women "is most effectively and efficiently achieved collectively."

Peruvian scholar-activist Virginia Vargas argued at the Feminist Dialogues that democracy *within* the global movement is perhaps one of the greatest contributions of feminist theory and practice, and shared her view that the challenge before the movement is to "transform ourselves at the same time we transform the world." Wendy Harcourt of Women in Development Europe (WIDE Network) added that democracy (within the movement) must *thrive* on disputes if it is to be healthy.

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<sup>22</sup> For example, the African Feminist Forum in 2006 and the AWID Triennial Forum in 2008.

Harcourt also invoked the tradition of shared authority in the movement, and argued for the continued importance of learning from all areas of the movement and working in "horizontal" ways. Such views were affirmed and augmented by discussions of diversity at the World Social Forum. One activist working on LGBT rights in Ecuador asserted that "Diversity means not leaving anyone suffering outside [the movement]. Not women, not LGBT persons, not those suffering from racism or economic oppression."

At one Feminist Dialogues session, Philippines-based activist Rodelyn Marte stressed the need for showing solidarity with one another "in times of victory and celebration, as well as during times of struggle." Following up with a particularly moving set of remarks, Fiji-based activist Yvonne Underhill-Sen called on FD participants for an expression of solidarity with "women who do not have the resources to be here." She went on to share her particular worries for a group of women in Fiji who had been unjustly arrested and were still being held in custody, but extended her comments to include all women who were unable to attend the gathering due to various challenges and limitations. Her comments served as an important reminder to all participants that by virtue of being present in this transnational space, we possessed certain privileges – freedom of movement, access to knowledge about the conferences, the economic resources to travel long distances and pay for lodging – that other women did not; but rather than encouraging us to feel guilty for such privilege, Underhill-Sen was suggesting that we can still "be in solidarity with one another," and that such solidarity happens in part through public recognition of those not present.

Viewed alongside one another, these examples illuminate multiple modes of articulating movement values that promote solidarity. I observed that, although there are many differences in what issues are articulated to be most important for women, what solutions are appropriate for tackling these issues, and even in what constitutes feminism, the one thread that appears to be nearly universal is the desire to support one another in the struggle, to foster connection, and to work in ways that strengthen the broader movement (with the understanding that the battle is occurring on many fronts, and thus requires different kinds of actors). Built into this notion is the explicit recognition of and respect for differences in experiences, beliefs, understandings, and strategies. Framing practices focusing on movement process and movement-building tend not to dismiss or ignore difference, but rather accommodate for it.

Smith (2002) explains that transnational social movement organizations (TSMOs) support group identities and solidarity that contribute to transnational mobilization. Given the importance of mobilization for the development of social movements, this insight is significant. However, we may be missing something if we assume that fostering shared frames is fruitful solely for growing or sustaining mobilization. Herein lies an opportunity to learn something valuable not just about transnational social movements, but about transnational feminisms more

specifically. In the case of transnational women's movements, movement actors are accountable to the rich traditions of feminist theory and practice, and the many historical lessons they provide. Similarly, they are accountable to the insights that have evolved from years of trying to work together across great chasms of difference; they have learned the dangers of universalizing and compartmentalizing, and do not want to repeat their missteps. As they move forward, they continually incorporate these lessons into their discourse, whether it be in the academy, in the halls of political institutions, or in the streets. What I am suggesting here is that framing across differences is not just a means to mobilizing people, but rather is also about remaining true to deeply held ideals related to the methodology of a movement. In this way, such framing may be a particularly important vehicle for promoting solidarity, which Taylor and Whittier (1992) argue is a key component of collective identity.

What, some may ask, is uniquely feminist about this? Are not other movements (historical and contemporary) committed to egalitarian, horizontal, and intersectional modes of working and thinking? Certainly, such attention to movement process is present among other movements for justice globally (e.g., labor, anti-racist movements). Furthermore, as Waterman (2002) notes, feminists are responsible for disseminating this attention to movement process among their own movement, but also for infusing extra-feminist movements with their methodological perspective:

There can be no doubt of the debt the global justice movement...owes to women's movements and feminist thinkers of the 1970s-80s. The influence can clearly be seen within the CSM [Call of Social Movements] and the [WSF] Charter themselves. Much of the thinking of the new movement (on counter-power resting in a democratic diversity) and behavior (public cultural outrage and celebration) can be traced back to feminists (2002: 8).

In sum, the emergent discourses invoking process, capacity-building and solidarity within the transnational women's movement in recent years may be a crucial tool for dealing with intramovement differences. From the perspective of transnational women's activists, these inwardly focused framing practices hold particular advantages that others lack. These frames are highly inclusive, broadly applicable, indigenously generated, maintain a constructive tone (unlike oppositional frames), and do not require a particular hierarchy of issues or agreement on any one strategic approach. Although such frames are consistent with feminist principles, their use does not require embracing of the feminist label, but rather allows for differences on this point, as well. Furthermore, frames with an inward focus may be just as effective as rights-based or diagnostic frames in terms of building bridges with other movements, as they call attention to shared ways of working. Given these features, it is not surprising that women's activists interested in transnational collaboration are using movement process frames more and more in attempts to transcend their differences.



However, movement process and capacity-building frames may also suffer from a significant shortcoming in that they can be vague. Talk of solidarity and movement-building may generate positivity and excitement, and may also provide a productive tool for keeping differences at bay, but it can be difficult to discern the precise meaning of such frames beyond the surface. What, for instance, constitutes women being in solidarity with one another across the world? How specific are the criteria, in terms of practices, that must be met in order to achieve solidarity or participate in movement-building? These questions may not necessarily prevent the efficacy of process-oriented frames in managing intramovement differences, but are worth considering for other strategic functions.

### **Commonalities among frames that promote solidarity**

The evidence demonstrates that oppositional, rights-based, and internally focused frames are all being utilized by feminists and women's activists in transnational spaces in efforts to work across differences and promote solidarity. Other types of frames focusing on institutional prognoses, economic prognoses, and identity were used far less frequently in the sessions I observed, and the cases in which they were used tended to be quite issue-specific as opposed to accounting for difference.

There are several important characteristics shared by each of these types of frames that reveal patterns in activists' strategies to deal with intramovement differences; in looking at the features that are shared by rights-based, diagnostic, and inwardly-focused frames, we gain insight into the aspects of collective action frames perceived by activists to be effective in promoting transnational solidarity. While making this knowledge visible is not the same as demonstrating a frame's efficacy in dealing with difference, it is important nonetheless. Feminists and women's movement actors are acutely aware of their history of fragmentation and are actively concerned with working collaboratively across differences. Assuming the presence of these underlying concerns, it is unlikely that they would engage repeatedly in framing that is ineffective or harmful in terms of promoting solidarity. Therefore, illuminating what these frames have in common may be a first step on the path toward identifying the features of frames that are in fact effective in transcending differences and promoting solidarity.

First, all of the frames implicated in this process, not just the rights-based frames, are very broad (although not necessarily intersectional, as the rights frame is); in using the term "broad," I mean to convey that they are capable of encompassing a multitude of issues of concern to activists in a variety of material, cultural, and political contexts, and that they stay away from specific prognostic proposals, especially. None are confined to a particular region or issue. Second, the rights-based, oppositional, and internally focused frames are frequently paired with language that explicitly acknowledges and, in many cases, celebrates diversity

within the movement. They do not push difference aside, but rather explicitly call it out and start with it as a premise.

As we note the commonalities in terms of what these three types of frames offer, it is also important to make visible what is absent in the frames. Neither the rights-based, oppositional, or internally focused frames offer an analysis that entails individuals and organizations remaining confined to their particular issues of interest; these frames explicitly reject the "silo" model encouraged by the Beijing Platform for Action. That is, each type of frame described here is not narrow, not exclusive, does not privilege particular regions, or even specific, narrowly defined issues. Moreover, none of these frames suggest that transnational solidarity or cooperation is impossible or not worth fighting for, but rather they indicate an underlying belief in both the desirability and possibility of solidarity in spite of difference.

## **Discussion**

The evidence shows that oppositional frames (most notably anti-neoliberalism, and anti-fundamentalist frames), rights-based frames, and internally focused frames (e.g., capacity-building and movement process frames) are being utilized as tools to deal with intramovement differences. Across a variety of sessions in major transnational activist spaces, these frames emerged as prominent in comparison to other types of frames; they were frequently employed in conjunction with references to the challenges of intramovement differences and/or were often highlighted as ways of promoting commonality even while respecting local particularities.

These findings offer valuable insights for researchers of social movements, especially those who study framing and strategies among transnational movements. Many case studies indicate that prognostic frames are the types of frames that most differentiate movement organizations from one another (Benford and Snow 2000); if that is indeed the case, we would not expect movement actors to rely on prognostic framing as a means of building consensus across differences. The evidence I present here is in part consistent with such assertions, but offers a clarification, as well. While activists did not utilize narrowly defined prognostic frames, such as those relying on institutional and economic solutions, they did utilize prognostic frames that are rights-based and frames that are process-oriented. This finding suggests that there may be additional nuance worth fleshing out in terms of what types of collective action frames amplify commonality versus differences.

My analysis also has implications for thinking about how diverse movements construct collective identity. Hunt, Benford, and Snow (1994) write that, "...identity constructions, whether intended or not, are inherent in all social

movement framing activities" (185). The shared, threatened identity category of "woman" is implicated by each of the frames I discuss; all women could potentially be harmed at some point by neoliberalism or fundamentalism, have their human rights violated, or feel solidarity on the basis of *being women*, despite other differences that exist among them. However, the frames also underscore a sense of shared struggle due to common enemies and challenges, a shared value of human rights, and a shared desire to provide mutual support, suggesting that both identity and reciprocal forms of solidarity are at work.

There are also useful lessons here for feminist theorists and activists, particularly those concerned with questions around transnational feminisms. While some remain skeptical about transnational cooperation and solidarity among women (Chowdhury 2009; Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Mendoza 2002), many activists believe this effort is worthwhile. Feminists and women's activists advocating at the transnational level, though working in different contexts, are by and large still striving to identify and capitalize on points of synergy and collaboration. Activists demonstrate an awareness of the seriousness of the differences, as well as the threats posed by those differences, but they refuse to let this be an excuse for inaction. They make visible the inequalities among activists that Mendoza (2002) and Desai (2005) worry about, but continue to seek out and attempt to use different collective action frames as appropriate in their efforts to collaborate.

Lyshaug (2006) describes the following crucial and ongoing problem for feminists: "How can feminists acknowledge and accommodate important differences among women without giving up the unity on which feminism's viability as a political movement depends" (78)? She reminds us that notions of difference and solidarity in transnational feminisms constitute well-trodden ground, but that feminist theorists tend to focus their attention on theoretical and ethical dimensions of these questions with comparatively less focus on what activists are actually *doing*. Thus, my findings are particularly important insofar as they reveal activists' discursive strategies for dealing with this central dilemma that she and others have posed.

Some final words about the scope of this analysis: Although I speculate about the efficacy of particular types of frames in overcoming intramovement differences, based on the empirical material at hand I stop short of making concrete assertions on this point. My data do not enable me to assess the outcomes of utilizing particular frames over others, but rather to document the uses of frames (as they relate to difference) in key transnational spaces at a certain moment. My primary interest has been to capture the language being used by activists, assess the ways in which they are using such language, and draw out insights based on these dynamics. In this spirit, I have demonstrated that: a) feminists and women's activists working in transnational spaces express acute awareness of previous movement fragmentation, as well as contemporary sources of division; b) they also express a desire to work through divisions in a way that acknowledges and respects,

but is not paralyzed by, movement differences; c) they are using particular types of frames in their efforts to promote solidarity; and d) these frames share certain characteristics. Future research should pursue questions of frame effectiveness not only in terms of its consequences for mobilization, but also for transcending differences in the service of transnational solidarity.

## **Appendix A: World Social Forum seminars and workshops attended<sup>23</sup>**

### **2004**

"Experiences in Organizing Garment Workers." 17 January, B32, 9-12 noon. Organized by the *Centre for Education and Communication (CEC)*.

"LGBT Alternative Strategies to Exclusionary Globalization." 17 January, A6, 9-12 noon. Organized by *LGBT South-South Dialogue*.

"A Dialogue Between Various Movements on Sexuality Issues." 17 January, Hall 2, 1-4 p.m. Organized by *Rainbow Planet*.

"Changing Faces of Dowry." 17 January, A16, 5-8 p.m. Organized by *Vimochana*.

"Gender and Permanent War." 17 January, B34, 5-8 p.m. Organized by the *Rosa Luxemburg Foundation*.

"The Many Faces of Fundamentalism." 18 January, A7, 9-12 noon. Organized by *Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)*.

"Education for Inclusion: A Gender Perspective." 18 January, B50, 1-4 p.m. Organized by the *Gender and Education Office of the International Council for Adult Education*.

"Networking for Women's Human Rights: A Workshop on Collaboration for Activists, Scholars, Policy Makers, and Donors." 18 January, C75, 5-8 p.m. Organized by Brooke A. Ackerly, Vanderbilt University.

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<sup>23</sup> In some cases, there is more than one session listed for a given time slot. In such cases, I attended only part of each session. Reasons for this include: 1) when a session ended early and I decided to attend another for the remainder of the slot, and 2) when I found a session to be poorly organized, not well attended, or otherwise unproductive, and thus chose to go to another session for the remainder of the time slot.

"A Dialogue Between Movements: Breaking Barriers and Building Bridges." 19 January, Hall 3, 9-12 noon. Organized by the *National Network of Autonomous Women's Groups, DAWN, AFM, and WICEJ*.

"Overcoming the Public/Private Divide." 19 January, A9, 1-4 p.m. Organized by *APRODEV-ICCO*.

"Overcoming Gender-Based Violence in the Private Sphere." 19 January, A11, 5-8 p.m. Organized by *Bread for the World*.

"Sex Selection: the Hidden Femicide." 19 January, B31, 5-8 p.m. Organized by *Vimochana*.

"Women in Conflict and Peace Building." 20 January, C100, 9-12 noon. Organized by *ActionAid Rwanda*.

"Honour Killings." 20 January, A10, 1-4 p.m. Organized by the *All India Democratic Women's Association*.

"Sexuality, Nationalism and Fundamentalism." 20 January, C73, 1-4 p.m. Organized by *PRISM*.

"Gender Justice and Globalisation." 20 January, C79, 5-8 p.m. Organized by *Gana Unnayan Parshad*.

## **2007**

"Sponsorship, Scholarship, and Human Rights Activism: Building Bridges and Fostering New Leadership." 21 January, 11:30-2 p.m. Organized by *The Human Dignity and Human Rights Caucus & the Global Feminisms Collaborative*.

"Gender Equality May Finally Arrive: UN Reform Brings New Hopes." 21 January, 2:30-5 p.m. Organized by *The Women's Environment and Development Organization*.

"Scholar-Activists and the World Social Forum Process." 21 January, 5:30-8 p.m. Organized by *AlterUQAM and the International Network of Scholar-Activists*.

"Revolutionizing Women's Consciousness." 22 January, 8:30-11 a.m. Organized by *Sociologists for Women in Society*.

"Citizenship: Democracy, Retribution, and Rights." 22 January, 11:30-2 p.m. Organized by *Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era*.

"Women Under Occupation in the Arab World." 22 January, 2:30-5 p.m. Organized by *Women Network*.

"Campaigning Experiences of the Grassroots Movement to End Female Genital Mutilation." 22 January, 2:30-5 p.m. Organized by *Equality Now*.

"Human Rights Assembly." 22 January, 2:30-5 p.m. Organized by the *Human Dignity and Human Rights Caucus*.

"Adapting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Needs of Women and Girls from Different Communities." 23 January, 11:30-2 p.m. Organized by *Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights*.

"Social Forum for Sexual Diversity." 23 January, 2:30-5 p.m. Organized by *LGBT South-South Dialogue, World March of Women, and Via Campesina*.

"Controversy Dialogue on Fundamentalisms and Anti-Globalization Alliance Building." 23 January, 5:30-8 p.m. Organized by *FEMNET and the Feminist Dialogues Coordinating Group*.

"Human Rights and Academic Activism." 23 January, 5:30-8 p.m. Organized by *Sociologos sin Fronteras*.

"Feminist Movement Building." 24 January, 11:30-2 p.m. Organized by *Articulación Feminista Marcosur, INFORM, FEMNET, WLUML, and others*.

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