Women’s issues and activists at the World Social Forum in Dakar

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Abstract

In this chapter, Julie Castro looks at gender at the WSF in Dakar. Combining a locally grounded approach with the results of the collective research, she portrays the whole range of actors of the women’s cause (transnational, but also international and local organizations). She then analyzes the weight, spaces, tensions, and blind spots of the women’s cause in Dakar, and shows that it was shaped by broader trends that structure the contemporary Senegalese society, notably the development industry and the remoralization of the public sphere.

Women were unquestionably present at the World Social Forum (WSF) in Dakar in February 2011 and in large numbers. Numerous women’s organizations, dressed in identical T-shirts or outfits made from fabric bearing their NGO logo, were visible in the ranks of the Forum opening march. The banners and signs they carried were sometimes obviously made for events at home: for example, one of them said “APROFES² Parité homme/femme. Instrument de défense nationale” (men-women parity, an instrument of national defense), referring to demonstrations prior to the 2010 law that introduced male-female parity in all partially or totally elective institutions; another read “les femmes comptent pour la paix en Casamance” (women count for peace in Casamance). There were also broader slogans, such as “No to impunity and violence against women and girls,” “Women, the backbone of Africa,” “Women, the drivers of development in Africa,” “Women, a positive force ignored in Africa,” and “Women, a vector for peace in Africa.” The percentage of women attendees remained high in the days that followed, as shown by the results of the quantitative survey: 43% of the survey respondents were women. Among them, the African contingent was as large as the European contingent: 41%. Next came the

1 I wish to thank Emmanuelle Bouilly for her acute reading and constructive critique of the first drafts of this chapter.

2 APROFES: Association pour la Promotion de la Femme Sénégalaise (Association for the Promotion of Senegalese women), based in Kaolack and set up in 1987.
contingent from the Americas with 14%, whereas the number of women from other continents was less than 2%. If we compare the participation of African men and women, we observe that the number of African women was proportionately smaller than that of their male counterparts, who represented 58% of the male respondents. Generally speaking, the WSF in Dakar was strongly marked by African attendees, who accounted for half the participants, male and female combined.

This massive presence of women was not peculiar to Dakar. Women have made up half or more of the participants at World Social Forums from the outset (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2010; Masson, 2003). The virtual absence of African women was notable at the first events, however, reflecting the weakness of the WSF’s ties to Africa in general. To remedy that situation, the WSF was held in Africa for the first time in 2006, initially “on tiptoe” because the Forum that year was polycentric, taking place simultaneously in Bamako, Karachi, and Caracas, and then on equal footing in 2007 in Nairobi. In Bamako as well as Nairobi, African women took part in the forums in huge numbers (Latourès, 2007).

In any case, the presence of women, even in massive numbers, in no way guarantees that women’s issues will be highlighted at WSFs. Leaving aside the question of their number to focus on the women’s rights movement itself, what do we observe? Activists and academics are unanimous: from the beginning, women’s rights have been marginal, if not marginalized, in alter-global social forum debates, meetings and assemblies as a whole. Yet “from the official standpoint, the alter-globalization movement has been above reproach: feminism is a stakeholder in the issues it defends and the WSF platform makes it a cross-movement topic that must be taken into consideration in every area” (Lamoureux, 2004: 171). Gender and diversity have appeared as an overarching theme of the WSF since 2002 (Conway, 2007). Nevertheless, “even if there is no formal hierarchy among the various struggles, anticapitalism is largely the core component and the other dimensions are often viewed merely as harmful consequences of capitalism” (Lamoureux, 2004: 181). The topics discussed thus concern primarily the “effects of the processes of economic, political, cultural, and social globalization on the living conditions of women evolving in a variety of contexts” (Latourès, 2007). According to the dominant view, women are “victims of globalization and not (...) actors likely to intervene in it” (Lamoureux, 2004: 180). In other words, capitalism is considered above all to aggravate

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3 Hereafter, I will use the expression “women’s rights” to refer both to self-identified women’s movements and those that describe themselves as feminist.
the dynamics of patriarchy. There is no place for gender understood as a category of analysis (Scott, 1986) or for the notion of “intersectionality” (Dorlin, 2009): alter-global movements thus appear to “resist linking class, gender and race in a structural manner” (Masson, 2003: 102). The first texts to discuss the importance of women’s issues in the forums were written by activists and published starting in 2003 (Karadenizli, Allaert, de la Cruz, 2003; Masson, 2003; Salazar, 2004; Bjork, 2004; Duddy, 2004). They were followed by academic publications often by researchers who were themselves directly involved in women’s issues organizations taking part in alter-global forums. In 2004, the journal *Recherches Féministes* brought out a special issue entitled “Féminisme, Mondialisation et Altermondialisation” [Feminism, Globalization and Alter-globalization]. Four articles in the issue examined the relationship between women’s movements and alter-global movements, alternating discussions on the ideological dimensions (the compatibility and possible convergences between feminist and alter-global analyses) with studies on the dynamics of the marginalization of women’s rights observed at alter-global forums (Druelle, 2004). In 2005, an article by Catherine Eschle discussed this issue in the journal *Signs*. It was followed by a special issue of *Journal of International Women's Studies*. The issue, entitled “Introduction to women’s bodies, gender analysis, feminist politics at the Forum Social Mundial” (Roskos and Willis, 2007), was devoted entirely to analyzing the marginalization of women and feminism in the WSF process. In 2008, Lilian Mathieu tackled the issue in the form of a chapter in a collective work on the alter-global movement in Europe (Mathieu, 2008). The first book to deal exclusively with the relationship between feminism and alter-globalization was co-authored in 2010 (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2010). The following year, three texts appeared on this issue: the first, in France, in an overview of the journal *Les cahiers du féminisme* (Joanny, 2011); the second in a book on “others,” i.e. concerning the production of certain illustrations of otherness in the discourses emanating from the WSFs (Conway, 2012); the third in the form of a chapter of *Handbook of World Social Forum Activism* (Hewitt and Karides, 2011).

In this nascent literature, we can distinguish two trends in the way women’s issues are discussed within alter-global forums. The first, which predominates in the English-speaking works, is in line with the thinking on the transnationalization of women’s movements. These articles, which account for a growing portion of feminist studies (Naples and Desai, 2002; Moghadam, 2005; Basu, 1995), are part of a wider field – the study of the transnationalization of causes and social movements – which has also been expanding rapidly since the early 1990s (Siméant, 2010). They put feminist/
women’s organizations that participate in social forums and belong to the broader group of transnational feminist networks at the heart of their analyses (Moghadam, 2005; Basu, 2010). Alter-global forums are viewed as “sites to introduce transnational feminism” and considered by some authors, incidentally, as the main spaces of protest against neoliberal globalization invested by feminist/transnational women’s movements (Desai, 2005: 349). For others, women’s rights in the WSF represents a specific sector of “transnational feminism” arising from the intersection of alter-global and transnational feminist spheres called “feminist antiglobalization activism” (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2010: 4). In all these cases, the sort of transnational feminism discussed in these works designates \textit{de facto} a particular organizational form – NGOs – and a particular level of action – the transnational level. Though “this focus of scientific literature on the NGO form” indeed “corresponds to an effect of real history,” it nevertheless leads to a number of biases: it tends to hide “the substratum” of transnational mobilization and “generate a kind of blindness with regard to the actors viewed empirically, as well as their practices and their social inscriptions” (Siméant, 2010). Local women’s/feminist organizations are mostly left aside, despite their considerable numerical presence at the various world social forums.

The second trend, this time among French-speakers, seeks to make the transnational character an area for questioning rather than a self-evident analytical category, and draws attention to the particular historical configurations that made it possible (Sommier, 2008: 16). Thus they recall the historicity of the forms of transnational political action (Tarrow, 2000), which preceded the “transnational turn” reached in the sociology of mobilizations. Even more, they underscore the fact that “alter-global mobilizations (…) continue to be characterized by strong national roots” (Sommier, 2008: 18). The crucial role played by woman’s organizations at the national level, all organizational forms combined, is brought out by Lilian Mathieu (2008) in the analysis of the differentiated inclusion of women’s issues in two European alter-global forums.

These developments invite us at the very least to widen the spectrum of the actors involved and take transnational NGOs, local organizations, and other types of organizations into consideration – for example, UN Women at the Dakar forum, which played a considerable role. But is it enough to make a statement on the marginalization of women’s issues within the WSFs? Certainly not, because beyond the question concerning the types of actors to take into account in the analysis, a whole set of new questions arises. What in fact should be observed in order to assess the importance given to women’s rights in an event like the WSF: the workshops and activities
organized by women's/feminist organizations? The role played by women's organizations in the coordinating bodies? The inclusion of gender issues in WSF activities that are not labeled “gender” or “women” or, in other words, how the WSF is “engendered”? The issue is at first methodological, of course, as dozens of workshops are held simultaneously at WSFs. But it goes further than methodology, because even if a collective survey were tasked with exhaustively monitoring all these aspects of the WSF, the question remains of how to interpret the various data collected. Disagreement on this issue is immediately apparent. Let us consider, for example, the question of physical spaces dedicated exclusively to women's issues within WSFs: are they an achievement of women's issues, which they strengthen, in continuity with the praxis of support groups and spaces introduced by the second wave of feminist movements? Or do they represent the sidelining or sectorization of women's issues, and hence illustrate their marginalization? Another example: the number of workshops that tackle gender issues head-on or more laterally. Clearly, this reflects the overall weight given to these issues. But it may simply be the effect of weak, depoliticized mainstreaming, which has been summed up as “transforming one of the two sexes into a social sector in which the living conditions and mode of integration into the whole needs to be reformed, while disregarding the fundamentally political dimension of the relationship between the sexes” (Hirata and Le Doaré, 1998: 24). From this point of view, should the dissemination of a certain depoliticized discourse on gender be considered a positive achievement of women’s rights? The answers to these questions appear to depend on the options of the actors present.

The assessment of the importance of women's rights in the WSF thus raises a host of questions that are already caught up in methodological, epistemological, and political issues. Indeed, the answers suggest groups of different actors, bring into play different conceptions of collective action and also reveal different political aims (improving the living conditions and status of women versus calling into question the systems that impose their subordination and gender hierarchies). While it is impossible to adopt an outside position to grasp and assess the importance of women's issues in a WSF (Harding, 2003), it is nevertheless possible to bring out some of the stakes, which is the task I have set for myself in this chapter. To do so, I will adopt an overview of the forum as a circumscribed space-time, and women's issues as a particular configuration arising from the movements and organizations that are present (with or without local ties).

This study will be divided into two parts: the first part will be devoted to the actors of the women's movement present at the WSF in Dakar. I
will begin by examining the issue of how to identify them – as women’s movement activists or as feminist activists – and the issues raised by that distinction. I will go on to present the different types of actors: NGO or international, transnational or local organizations: all types of actors involved in women’s rights in Dakar will be considered. As far as possible, I will evoke the trajectories of these different types of actors and, where relevant, supply information on the history of their involvement in previous WSFs. Part II will propose different perspectives on women’s issues in WSF, looking at the issue of physical spaces, the strategies adopted by women’s issues’ activists (some seeking to “engender” WSFs, others pursuing different objectives), and finally the tensions and blind spots, i.e. the issues and topics adjacent to or part and parcel of women’s issues that were not or only very marginally discussed during the event in Dakar. The data that will be mobilized for the study comes from several sources: the results of the collective survey conducted during the WSF; the observations carried out during the forum; an overview of press articles and activist texts pertaining to the WSF in Dakar and available online.

4.1 Transnational, but not only: the actors of women’s issues in Dakar

Women’s movement or feminism?

In the survey administered during the WSF, two identifications were possible: activists could call themselves members of a “women’s association” or of a “women’s rights and feminist group”. Identifying with the feminist cause is indeed problematic on the African continent (Latourès, 2007; Tripp et al., 2008) and more broadly in the Muslim world (Badran, 1994), as well as in Asia, in the former Soviet territories, etc. (Basu, 2010). In many societies, the “feminist” label is used by its detractors to denounce anti-male and/or anti-family positions (Antrobus, 2005: 144). And this is not merely a common sense view: feminism has also been challenged by women’s issues activists and scholars themselves. By the way, West Africa has been the source of the most virulent criticism of the categories used by Western feminists to describe African realities; these feminists are considered exogenous to the realities of the continent and helping to reproduce forms of epistemological domination (Cornwall, 2005). From “STIWA(n)ism” (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) proposed by Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), to “motherism” opposed by Acholonu (1995) to the “anti-mother,
anti-child, anti-nature and anti-culture” stance of feminism, as well as Walker’s “womanism” (Walker, 1983) and its rejection of conflictual separatism between men and women, there is a whole current of African literature that challenges the categories and presuppositions and ultimate refutes its identification with “feminism”.

In practice, many women's issues activists said they belonged simultaneously to the two subgroups. More exactly, 73% of the members of women's associations also declared they belonged to a women's rights/feminist group; the opposite was less commonplace, with only 56% of the members of a women's rights/feminist group stating they were also members of a women's association. These survey results suggest it is necessary to soften the sometimes rigid distinction between movements that defend strategic interests on the one hand, and those that defend practical interests on the other (Molyneux, 1985). Indeed, these categories are not mutually exclusive, and an organization can simultaneously carry on activities coming under both options. Moreover, shifts can occur: a women's movement may shift its discourse towards more radical demands, or the reverse. Finally, we should also take into account the possible dissociation between identifying with the feminist cause (largely shared by the members of the women's associations surveyed) in an activist context, on the one hand, and speaking out as a feminist in a public sphere that tends to delegitimize any discourse and any person advocating feminism, on the other.

The activists

Let us now turn to the women's issues activists who were present in Dakar and see what sort of profiles emerge from the survey results. Unsurprisingly, women predominated numerically in both groups, with a significant link between the fact of being a woman and belonging to one of these two groups: they represented 63% of the activists in the women's rights and feminist groups and 70% of the activists in women's associations. A significant link was also noted between the feeling of having been personally subjected to discrimination relating to gender or based on the sexual preferences in one's life and membership in a women's rights or feminist group. On the other hand, there was no significant link between the fact of having suffered discrimination – of any kind – during one's life and belonging to a women's association. This gap in relation to discrimination can be linked to different ways of presenting and experiencing oneself, which can be themselves the product of interventions and policies. For instance, through their promotion of testimony, NGOs have imported new technologies of
the self (Nguyen, 2002). Moreover, the explicitly feminist current attaches great importance to topics linked to discrimination based on gender and sexual preference. “Coming out” and victim testimonials are encouraged and viewed as militant acts and as steps towards reconstructing self-esteem.

The women’s issues activists had often been or were still engaged in other causes, and this tendency was characteristic of the WSF as a whole: a very large percentage of the participants in Dakar were “hyper-militants,” combining several types of commitment either sequentially or simultaneously. In terms of sector of activity, the two most frequently found among women’s issues activists reflected the high number of women working in general: employment in the public sector ranked first (around 27%), followed by the associative sector (about 26%). The other sectors accounted for 15% of the activists. From the standpoint of socio-professional category, 37% of the activists in women’s associations were in management and the liberal professions, 27% in mid-level occupations and the other profiles covered less than 15% of the activists. The percentage of executives and liberal professions was even higher among the activists in women’s rights and feminist groups, with 45% in management and liberal professions, followed by 27% in mid-level occupations.

Where did the women’s issues activists come from? Among the self-proclaimed “women’s rights and feminism” group, 55% came from the African continent, 22% from Europe, 16% from the Americas (with the other continents accounting for less than 5% of the activists). Senegalese activists were by far the most numerous at round off to 27 of the members of this rights group, followed by French (12%) and Brazilians 5%. Among the activists in women’s associations, the proportion of Africans was higher still at 64.5%, followed by the European (16.5%) and American (12%) contingents. The most represented nationalities were, in descending order, Senegalese (35%), French (8.5%), and Malian (5%).

The women’s issues militants present in Dakar very often came on behalf of an organization – 79% representing the members of women’s associations and 78% representing the members of women’s rights and feminism groups – thus, more often than the other militants at the forum (the average for the forum as a whole was 69% of survey respondents who declared

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4 From this standpoint, the women’s movement is no different than the other causes, since 25% of the total number of survey respondents were working in the public sector and 25% in the associative sphere.

5 These proportions are virtually identical to those measured for the total survey population: 43.5% were managers or in liberal professions and 26.5% had mid-level occupations.
they had come on behalf of an association). Moreover, 40% of the women's issues activists were currently or had been employees of an organization. About half of them had their travel expenses to Dakar paid for by their organization. This is in line with the overall tendency of the forum, as the rate of travel financing by organizations, all causes combined, was in the vicinity of this figure.

To sum up, the women's issues activists were primarily – but not exclusively – women, in large part from the African continent and often “hyper-militant” (involved in other causes in the past or at present). More than half of these women were employed in the public or associative sector and more than 60% were engaged in high-level or mid-level occupations. Slightly less than 80% of them had come to the forum in Dakar on behalf of an organization, and 40% had previously been or were at the time employees of an organization.

The women's issues organizations

The transnational women's organizations present in Dakar grew out of global conferences on women that succeeded each other from 1975 to 1995, as well as parallel NGO forums and continental and regional preparatory meetings held upstream from these events. Transnational feminist networks became involved in large part in the alter-global sphere starting in the early 2000s. At the time, transnational feminism was in a period of crisis, divided by serious tensions between “the supporters of a pragmatic approach and those who favored a ‘radical’ approach and critique” (Druelle, 2004). Some activists worried that the principle of introducing a new global economic order, put forward at the first three global conferences on women, was being sidelined. Noting the coincidence between the rise of neoliberalism, with the implementation of structural adjustment programs starting in 1982 in the South and analogous policies in the North, and the abandonment of the demand for a new world order at the international conferences on women, they denounced the depolitization of the women’s movement and the risk of being “hijacked” by the United Nations systems. In this context of crisis within the transnational women's movement, the emergence of the alter-global movement was perceived by certain feminist organizations as an opportunity to re-radicalize and re-politicize women's issues (Druelle, 2004).

The two most influential transnational women's organizations in the WSF are, according to Valentine Moghadam (2005), the World March of Women (WMW), and the Articulación Feminista Marcosur (AFM). Both were present in Dakar. In truth, the organization most discussed in the
literature is the World March of Women, which the same author claims represents “the main expression [of] global feminism,” understood here as “women's discourse and movement aimed at advancing the condition of women through improved access to resources, equal measures to achieve equality between men and women and the empowerment of women within national boundaries using transnational forms of organization and mobilization” (Moghadam, 2000: 62). Originating in discussions between a northern movement (the Fédération des femmes du Québec) and other women's organizations at the NGO forum organized within the framework of the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (Giraud and Dufour, 2010), the WMW began taking part in international alter-global forums from the very first forum in Porto Alegre in 2001 (Lamoureux, 2004). The group soon joined the International Council of the WSF (Decarro, 2003), and played a very active role in the Assemblies of Social Movements, which take place at each forum. The AFM, on the other hand, was the fruit of inter-NGO dialogs organized prior to the World Conference on Women in Beijing.6 WMW activists like those in the AFM belong to the privileged social classes and have a very extensive social network, particularly at the international level (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2010: 72). Finally, these two organizations were largely responsible for setting up the Feminist Dialogues, a high point for the discussion of women's issues at WSFs, which I will come back to later.

Other transnational networks were also present in Dakar. Among them, DAWN (Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era) and WIDE (Women In Development Europe), both of which came into being in the wake of the World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985 (Bereni, 2008), have been participants in the alter-global movement since the “Battle of Seattle” in 1999 (Moghadam, 2005: 13). The networks of WLUML (Women Living Under Muslim Law) and of WILDAF (Women in Law and Development in Africa) also took part in the WSF in Dakar.

These are the transnational organizations that showed the greatest perseverance in attempting to “engender” the WSF. Thus they quickly joined the forum bodies: as I mentioned earlier, the WMW became a member of the WSF International Council, followed soon after by DAWN and the AFM. In 2003, there were six feminist organizations in the International Council. Their active participation at this level widened the scope of demands and included in them the reform of the operating mode of WSF coordinating bodies. In 2005, the WMW drew up a document aimed at combating the

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marginalization of women’s organizations and their concerns, notably by promoting a parity policy within the WSF. These requests, which also included specific proposals pertaining to the WSF organization and the operation of “leadership” bodies, were not implemented (Conway, 2012: 121).

In Dakar, the women’s movement also included in its ranks UN Women, a new institution that had just launched its activities. As part of the overall reform of the United Nations initiated in 2005, this composite entity was formed by merging existing UN bodies such as the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the International Institute Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), and the Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues (OSAGI). In Dakar, UN Women attracted attention by the size of its tent, its visibility and logistics reflecting its status as an international institution (large, colored signs, a special area for viewing institutional films), and the variety of gender-related activities held there.

What about African organizations? Some that had arisen from UN Conferences on Women were present, such as AAWORD (Association of African Women for Research and Development). This organization was created in Dakar in 1976 at the first African Regional Conference on Women (Drueelle, 2004) in response to the experiences of participating in the World Conference in 1975 and the conference organized in 1976 at Wellesley College (which brought together researchers and activists of the women’s movement) (Tripp et al., 2008). Subsequently, AAWORD took part in the consultative process of “civil society” organized around UN conferences, and in the critique of Western feminist imperialism (Drueelle, 2004) in Copenhagen in 1980. With the stated objective of “decolonizing research on African women,” it played a pivotal role in women’s issues in Dakar, as I will show later on.

Senegalese NGOs accounted for the largest number of organizations at the WSF. It is necessary here to highlight the decisive weight of development – understood here as a set of historically situated discourses and practices organized in the form of an indirect, private government (Mbembe, 2000) notably embodied by NGOs – in the evolution of African women’s movements starting in the 1970s, with the arrival of “gender-related” funding.7 To be sure, women’s movements were already in existence on the continent, notably at the grassroots level, including in national struggles for independence

7 The book by Ester Boserup, which came out in 1970, was the first to link women’s issues to those of development. It played a considerable role in launching the institutionalization of gender in development programs.
(Tripp et al., 2008). Later on, single-party regimes often attempted to co-opt the women’s movements by setting up an institutional network headed by African First Ladies. Organizations financed by development programs, which were sometimes co-opted by the ruling elites, began appearing in the 1970s. The situation changed radically in the early 1990s, when Africa experienced the combined effects of a wave of political liberalization, an influx of funding from international donors to “civil society” rather than to national bodies, and the inability of governments to implement essential social policies due to drastic budget cuts imposed by structural adjustment programs. These shifts led to the rapid growth of national NGOs, many of which took up gender issues. Thus, the 1990s saw myriad new organizations spring up along with the “NGOization” of already existing ones eager to qualify for gender-related financing, such as the FNGPF (National Federal of Groups to Promote Women) in Senegal.8 The World Conferences on Women, particularly the one held in Beijing in 1995, also encouraged the creation of grassroots organizations. Continental events led to similar dynamics: for example, the Africa-wide United Nation’s Women’s Conference, held in Dakar in 1994, gave rise to new networks introduced on the national scale.9

Behind the effect of institutional formatting – in the form of NGOs – and their common dependence on donors, African women’s organizations are quite heterogeneous. They focus on different issues, with some concentrating on economic aspects (micro-credit, income-generating activities, etc.), and others on achieving broader inclusion and representation of women, in political life for example. Their relationship with the base is often ambivalent. The NGOs set up in the 1990s were more expertise-oriented and relied largely on educated, urban elites.10 When they came under strong criticism within national public spheres, some tried to reconnect with grassroots movements and thereby recapture their legitimacy (Pommerolle and Siméant, 2008a). Conversely, movements with strong local roots developed strategies to link up with national and international networks. Let us take for example APROFES (Association for the Promotion of Senegalese Women). Located in Kaolack, this NGO is characterized by a local base and numerous ties to national and transnational networks. It exemplifies a fringe of Senegalese women’s movements that succeeded in avoiding centralization and “going through the elites” in Dakar that often prevails

9 Ibid., 67-68.
10 Ibid., 87.
in NGOs. Its participation in the network of Sggil Jigeen, one of the most active women's issues organizations in Senegal, based in Dakar, gave it a solid connection to the national level (Sieveking, 2008). APROFES played an important role in supporting women's issues at the WSF in Dakar, where it joined with a northern organization called the CADTM (Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt) to organize the forum of African Women's Struggles, held only a few days before the WSF. The final declaration of the women's assembly borrowed heavily from the one articulated by this forum.

4.2 Strategies, tensions, and blind spots around women's issues in Dakar

Weight and space

Women's issues ranked high on the list of causes represented in Dakar. More than a quarter of survey respondents had been or were currently members of a “women's rights and feminist” movement, and 20% of a “women's association.” The “women's rights and feminist” group was the fourth most represented, and “women's associations” the ninth. The three most represented causes – in descending order: defense of human rights, humanitarian/development aid/international solidarity, and people mobilized “against neoliberal globalization,” reflect the importance of certain organizations – in this case, human rights, humanitarian and international solidarity – in the genesis of alter-global movements (Fillieule, Agrikoliansky, and Sommier, 2010). This ranking of causes also reveals that other spheres which played a significant role in generating alter-global movements had few representatives in Dakar: trade unions, the landless movement, and the radical left.

As in previous forums, the large presence of women at the event in Dakar contrasted sharply with female representation on stage at the assemblies and in the coordinating bodies. Male elites and more broadly modes of male interaction in the forum leadership and organization – sometimes summarized in the expression “Porto Alegre men” (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2010, 34) – were still predominant in Dakar. In this regard, the alter-global movement is in no way an exception to the rule. As certain authors have noted, “Sexism does not end at the door to activist meetings” (Roux, 2005). The phenomenon affects all militant movements, even those that are critical of the sexual division of labor, including activist labor, and more broadly of gender hierarchies (Fillieule and Roux, 2009). Among the thirteen
committees in charge of preparing the WSF, one was called “Gender and Fairness.” It was tasked with “facilitating the consideration given to gender in the WSF, (...) strengthening women’s participation in the scientific and cultural program of the WSF [and helping] to ensure that gender is taken into account in the preparatory process [sic] and in the activities organized during the Forum.” The objectives were therefore rather classical, combining reinforcement of the role of gender as a theme with increased participation of women in the WSF organization and activities.

The central space of the Dakar forum (both geographically, because it was situated very close to the epicenter of the site, and metaphorically for women’s issues) was definitely the “Women’s Village.” Faced with considerable logistical problems that marred the first day of the forum – the rooms planned for workshops were not available or did not exist, women’s movement activists (especially AAWORD members), supported by the “Gender and Fairness Committee,” quickly set up a large red tent called “Women’s Village.” Although it was strategically located on the campus and in the forum, the tent’s very poor acoustics prevented much of the audience from following the discussion. In practice, the tent allowed a large number of activities to take place, hence creating a geographical concentration of gender-related activities. The UN Women’s tent, mentioned earlier, was just a few steps away from “Women’s Village,” thereby strengthening the effect of concentration. It contrasted sharply with the surrounding stands of Senegalese women’s associations, which were far more makeshift and much less well equipped. The structural inequalities between the different types of women’s organizations present in Dakar were thus clearly in view.

Of the twelve main topics at the Dakar forum, only three referred explicitly to gender issues. The first topic discussed the issue of discrimination relating to sexual orientation and gender; the sixth was committed to “a world freed from capitalism principles and structures, patriarchal oppression, any form of domination by financial authorities, transnational and unfair systems of trade, neocolonial domination and domination by debt”; the last called for “new forms of subjectivity and epistemology opposed to racism, Eurocentrism, patriarchy and anthropocentrism.” Furthermore, relatively few sessions or workshops dealt specifically with gender or women during the forum. Of the 470 self-organized activities that took place January 7-9, only 33, i.e. 14%, were concerned with “gender,” or more exactly, in the overwhelming majority of cases, with “women” (one term or the other appeared in the title of the activity). Finally, of the 38 assemblies of convergence that took place during the last two days of the forum, two were directly linked to women’s issues: the first, entitled “Women and
Women’s Issues and Activists at the World Social Forum in Dakar

Development,” was organized by French international solidarity associations, whereas the second – the “Assembly of Women’s Convergence,” was organized by the heavyweights of transnational feminism and other alterglobal organizations particularly active in women’s issues: respectively World March of Women, Articulación Feminista Marcosur, Women’s International Democratic Federation, Femnet for the women’s organizations, and Vía Campesina and the Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt for allied organizations. Although these figures conceal the possible use of gender as a category of analysis in the other activities and assemblies, they nevertheless suggest the continuing prevalence within the forum of reluctance to think about how relationships of race, class, and gender are intertwined and essentially part of every topic.

What were the highlights for the women’s movement at the WSF in Dakar? First, it should be pointed out that at WSFs, semi-autonomous events are organized around women’s issues: “the most common practice is to hold the women’s forum as a semi-autonomous event during the WSF. That is what happened at the Summit of Peoples in Quebec in 2001. It was also the case at the third Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2003 and at the European Social Forum in Paris in the autumn of 2003. Usually, the women’s forum takes place on the day preceding the official opening of the WSF, so that women who take part can also participate in other WSF events” (Lamoureux, 2004: 179). These semi-autonomous events have been given different names over the years, and the WMW and the AFM have been the most active in organizing them. The first was planeta FEMEA in Porto Alegre in 2002 (Conway, 2012), which originated in the World’s Women’s Planet tent set up by the Brazilian delegation for the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 (Forsyth, 2005: 780). Next there was a European assembly for women’s rights at the European Social Forum in 2003, organized by the WMW, which drew about 3,500 participants (Conway, 2007). Then, in 2004, the first Feminist Dialogue of the WSF took place on the initiative of South Asian and Latin America women activists at the forum in Mumbai (Roskos and Willis, 2007: 6). This event has continued to be held at virtually all the subsequent forums; scheduled a few days before the start of the WSF, it is considered a highlight of the women’s rights movement. The AFM plays a crucial role in its organization (Conway, 2007). In Dakar, contrary to the previous versions, the Feminist Dialogue (called Inter-movement Feminist Dialogue) for

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12 www.radiofeminista.net/feb07/notas/feminist_charter.htm
once took place during the forum. But it turned out to be a very marginal event: organizational problems had kept it from being held in the originally planned space; only a handful of militants were gathered together, sitting on the ground in a tent near the building where the session was supposed to take place, which looked unoccupied and therefore displayed no sign indicating the topic discussed.\textsuperscript{13} No African women activists attended. At the WSF in Bamako in 2006, on the other hand, the Feminist Dialogue was a key event for the women’s movement, attracting a crowd of more than 350 participants (Latourès, 2007). The only semi-autonomous event in Dakar devoted to women’s issues was the forum on African Women’s Struggles mentioned earlier. It was organized in Kaolack a few days before the WSF by APROFES, the Social Forum of Kaolack and the CADTM. With about 600 participants, according to the organizers, and a plenary session followed by five workshops, this forum ended by a declaration using “feminist” language and devoting a large part of the discussion to “intersectionality,” entitled the “Final Declaration of the Forum on African Women’s Struggles.”\textsuperscript{14} The Women’s Convergence Assembly held at the end of the forum was expected to adopt a joint declaration, based on the declaration of the forum of African Women’s Struggles and “The Letter of Solidarity with the Struggle of the Women of the World” which had been drafted during the WSF and signed by some thirty organizations.\textsuperscript{15} There were no significant divergences between the two texts and some organizations were in fact signatories of both. The session was nevertheless repeatedly disturbed by Moroccan militants who vehemently refused to have the Sahrawi women’s right to self-determination mentioned in the final declaration. Instead of a common declaration, the Women’s Convergence Assembly concluded with a letter made available to the organizations for signature, testifying to the relative weakness and lack of cohesiveness of the women’s movement in the face of the dissension aroused by the Sahrawi question.

Strategies and practices

I will come back only briefly to the various strategies implemented by the women’s movement activists to try and “engender” the WSF. First, because

they have been discussed at length in the works cited in introduction; second because they were in no way specific to the Dakar forum; finally, and above all, because I would like to give more emphasis to the strategies that were not part of the women's movement, in other words, those that were not pursuing objectives related to gender equality or women's status and living conditions, but which nevertheless reveal facets of the militant work of women's issues activists. In Dakar, the strategies alternated between a centrifugal tendency – strengthening the movement through semi-autonomous events – and a centripetal tendency, marked in particular by the intervention of women's issues activists in other WSF spaces (like the intervention of the WMW in two other convergence assemblies: the Assembly of Social Movements in which it took part at every WSF, and the assembly to unite struggles against militarization with those in favor of decolonization).

For African women's movements, the WSF constituted a space with multiple resources, which they tried to seize in several ways. The Senegalese women's organizations, which were massively present in Dakar, stood out by the diversification of their activities at the forum, often combining the sale of products at stands with prospecting organizations seen as potential donors, and participating in the activities of the forum itself. The daily newspaper *Flamme d’Afrique*, published throughout the forum, noted that:

> We toured the dozens of stands set up on the grounds of Cheikh Anta Diop University, on the new campus hosting the tenth World Social Forum, to find the groups led by women’s organizations. We counted a good twenty of them occupied by associations, federations, non-governmental organizations, cooperatives and other women’s networks – stands that attracted visitors as much by the display of products as by the ideas upheld by their occupants. But when one looked closely at these stands, one realized that the women’s organizations that occupy them were not there solely to engage in commerce. To be sure, the loincloths, shoes, chains, necklaces, pottery and other fruits and transformed products were the attractions, but they were not the essential part, as several stand occupiers gave us to understand.\(^{16}\)

In another edition, the same newspaper related the comments of Senegalese activists who explained that they took advantage of the forum to identify

and seek out new donors: “Beyond the small purchases that participants might make, her organization is expecting opportunities for much more significant business. ‘We already had two contacts with a Belgian and a Cameroonian,’ Mrs. Dramé confided. The African Network of Women Workers emphasizes such contacts because the organization needs to be restructured.” The WSF thus represented a chance to make contact with current or potential donors, which have become critically important since available funding declined in the late 2000s when donors went back to delivering funds to governmental agencies (Tripp et al., 2008: 73). The usual practices of the development world were also on view at the forum, e.g. the distribution of per-diems during a workshop on HIV/AIDS. While these practices and strategies, so widespread in the sphere of development, occurred at most of the earlier WSFs, they were stepped up in Dakar by the strong “NGOization” of Senegalese and more broadly African civil society.

Another aspect of action that was invested in Dakar can be read between the lines of a report by the Gender and Fairness Committee. Along with the traditional aims mentioned above, the committee also wished “to ensure that the concerns of ordinary, especially rural, women [are] taken into account.” Furthermore, the committee should “encourage the appropriation of World Social Forum issues by women, women’s organizations and grassroots social movements” so that “these women, the women’s organizations and the grassroots movements [have] a good understanding of the issues of the World Social Forum and [mobilize] to ensure their concerns are taken into account.” These words echo the divide already mentioned between expertise-oriented national NGOs, led by educated elites, and grassroots movements in rural regions, as well as the low level of identification of the women’s movement activists at Dakar: only 60% of them identified themselves “very much” with the alter-global cause, 29% “quite a bit,” and 11% “a little.” Actually, not only women’s movements tend to avoid alter-global discourse: more broadly indeed, “within the WSF, the ‘social movements’ tendency remains (...) largely organized and defended by non-African delegates” (Pommerolle and Siméant, 2008a). Facing this situation, the Senegalese women’s movement activists involved in the alter-global spheres reacted by using the WSF to “raise the awareness” of local women’s movements.

Finally, we might note that the mobilization of African women, massively present at the opening march of the forum and consistently in attendance.

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throughout the forum, is reminiscent of an old tradition of using women as a “strategic reserve” in national political life. Under single-party regimes, African women’s movements were largely co-opted by authorities, which did not hesitate to use them for political ends (Sow, 1997; Tripp et al., 2008). The forms and repertoires of action available to women’s movements thus remain marked by their historical trajectories (Tripp et al., 2008: 59), and these large-scale practices definitely left their imprint on the forum as a whole.

**Tensions, dissensions, and a blind spot**

Finally, I would like to discuss the tensions and dissensions that arose in Dakar as well as a topic that was – significantly I thought – virtually absent from the WSF. The women’s movement has its share of disagreements and tensions: between “femocrats” singing the praises of mainstreaming and radical feminists calling for a structural transformation of gender relationships; between militants seeking the abolition of female genital mutilation and activists denouncing Western imperialism at work in criticizing these practices; fault lines run through the WSF just as, more generally, they run through the women’s movement as a whole. In my view, there is one point worth emphasizing with regard to the forum in Dakar: the failed rendezvous with the radical fringe of African feminism represented by the African Feminist Forum. This forum, launched in 2006 in Accra and numerically dominated by English-speakers, assumes and claims a feminist identity and proclaims itself radical in the sense that it seeks a fundamental transformation of relationships between women and men.\(^\text{19}\) Defining itself as an autonomous space dedicated to internal reflection and strengthening the movement, “a space in which African women could celebrate their feminist identity without recourse to apology, qualification or compromise,”\(^\text{20}\) it declares its solidarity with marginalized women (African lesbians, sex workers, women with disabilities) and stands ready to counter the rise of religious, ethnic, and cultural fundamentalisms.\(^\text{21}\) One of the objectives established at the first forum was to join the dynamic of WSFs, which was the case in Nairobi with the Feminist Dialogue during which the charter of feminist principles for African feminists was officially launched.\(^\text{22}\) A few

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19 See the online article consulted on May 13, 2013: [www.opendemocracy.net/5050/jessica-horn/ tales-of-lionesses-third-african-feminist-forum](http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/jessica-horn/tales-of-lionesses-third-african-feminist-forum).


months before the WSF in Dakar, a new edition of this forum took place in the same city, to the great regret of certain African feminists such as Amina Mama, who said with regard to Dakar: “As a feminist – 30 years I’ve been involved with this – it concerns me that there’s still a parallelism going on. At times I felt as if I was in a time warp. I think that social movements have to take this up more seriously.” And although French speakers are in the minority within the African Feminist Forum, at least three – all Senegalese – participated actively in the WSF in Dakar.

This failed rendezvous illustrates the tensions that arise around the possibility of a radical feminist discourse in the Senegalese public sphere that I previously mentioned when discussing the auto-identification of women’s issues organizations as women’s movement or feminists. Other elements point to the same dynamic: let us take the example of the Yewwu Yewwi movement, which arose in the early 1980s. Calling explicitly for the abolition of patriarchy and the radical questioning of gender hierarchies, this movement was the crucible of a whole generation of women’s organizations, some of which, like the Siggil Jigeen network mentioned earlier, are seen today as spearheading the women’s movement in Senegal (Kane and Kane, 2012). Yet these “daughter” organizations did not assume a feminist identity but instead chose to align themselves with the women’s movement. They are constantly forced to deal with the increased risk of seeing their discourses disqualified for calling into question traditions or religion (and hence considered illegitimate by an ever-growing fringe of citizens), and the need to give substance to the discourses and programs of their donors or partners. And while their discourse might occasionally take on radical accents and they even call themselves feminists within the space of the WSF, they are more interested in dialog and concerted negotiation with the religious or “traditional” authorities at events organized on the local level (Sieveking, 2008). Thus, it appears that the “local associations of women develop their repertoires of action under the impact of resources and constraints at various levels, both local and national as well as international” (Lacombe et al., 2011). For them, the WSF has certainly represented the combination of a series of opportunities (to prospect for new donors, generate revenue, create ties at the international level, etc.) and constraints (the risk linked to publicly exposing their allegiance to discourses that are robbed of legitimacy due to their exogenous, imported character, and therefore qualified as unsuited to the realities of “Africa” or Islam at the national level).

Another difference from Nairobi: the virtual absence of the LGBT movement in Dakar. Of the 1,069 people surveyed, only 57 had been or were currently actively committed to the LGBT cause. More than half of them stated they were activists for women’s movements (42 for women’s rights and feminist groups, 34 for women’s associations). During the forum, the only workshop devoted entirely to LGBT issues drew an audience of less than a dozen people, seated directly on the ground in a tent without any banner or panel to identify the topic discussed. No Senegalese attended and the discussions took place in English, the only language shared by all the participants in the workshop. In a country that criminalizes homosexuality, the question of the visibility of the LGBT cause was especially sensitive. And homophobic discourse was indeed not absent from the WSF: in the opening march, a popular Senegalese rap group, surrounded by a dense crowd of dancing militants from all over the world, slipped homophobic words in Wolof in between refrains calling for the abolition of Third World debt.24 A scandal had already shaken the public sphere in 2008, when a local newspaper had printed photos of a homosexual wedding said to have taken place in Dakar. An international conference on HIV/AIDS held in the Senegalese capital where homosexual practices in Africa were widely discussed triggered a surge of homophobic discourse in the press. This case raised once again the question of the hostility provoked by the visibility and voice given to homosexuality in a society in which a multitude of forms of silent accommodation prevail (Broqua, 2007). In this regard, the WSF in Dakar definitely tended to adopt a low profile.

More broadly, the women’s issues in Dakar also highlighted the moralizing discourses driving numerous contemporary West African societies, fuelled by the intersection between at least two phenomena that expanded rapidly at the end of the 1980s: the renewal of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa (Soares and Otayek, 2007; Saint-Lary and Samson, 2011) on the one hand, and the revival of traditionalist discourses (Foucher and Smith, 2011: 30) on the other. Rooted in a context marked by a profound, uninterrupted economic crisis since the 1970s, the dismantling of the state under the effect of structural adjustment programs and massive, unchecked urbanization, the support those discourses enjoy within the population is all the greater as development has obviously failed. They actually give a privileged position to women and their behavior, either by elevating them to the rank of

24 One of the artists behind the idea for the caravan, Fou Malade, who joined the “Y’en a marre” movement (We’re fed up) and is among its leaders, has since taken highly virulent official positions against homosexuality. I wish to thank Emmanuelle Bouilly for pointing out these facts.
guardians of “tradition,” or by enjoining them to embody Islamic renewal. Recent research has brought out the consequences for women of this moral renewal of the public sphere and subtly analyzed the different forms of their commitment to these new forms of Islam (Schulz, 2012; Masquelier, 2009). In Dakar, some debates have been indeed caught in the crossfire of sharp criticism opposing “tradition” or “Islam” to the demands and actions in favor of women’s rights. An article in Flamme d’Afrique recounts one of these episodes:

Amphitheater I of the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, shortly after 10 a.m. On the stage, two ladies and four young men, facing an audience that appeared totally disinterested in whatever they were babbling about. Some were busy with their cell phones, whereas others kept leafing through notebooks and books, revising of course but against a background of whispering. We therefore assumed that they were there just to take a break between classes. Imagine our surprise when the issue came up of early marriage in the Casamance region, based on a project under way in Ziguinchor. The project, called “Women have the right,” is run by the University of Ziguinchor and implemented by students with funding from the Italian NGO COSPE (Cooperation for the Development of Emerging Countries). A young girl of 14, required by her father to enter a forced marriage with her uncle, had repeatedly run away the day before the ceremony was to be celebrated until she was finally saved by the project. The student project leaders raised the father’s awareness about the risks to the girl’s immature body, with the added weight of Senegalese law, which prohibits marriage for young girls before age 16. Moreover, the girl must consent to the marriage and it is prohibited if they are related. The statement of these legal arguments from Senegal’s Family Code, particularly its sociological aspects (age and kinship) caused an outcry from the young people present in the hall. Almost all of them were from Casamance or Fouta; we then realized that contrary to what we had supposed, they were not there by chance and they were listening. Abdoulaye Sy, a first-year student in English, a newcomer from his home community of M’Boumba in Fouta, did not understand why one should not marry off very young girls since, in any case, they would end up pregnant: “At that age, they say we shouldn’t marry them, but we can see that they all have boyfriends.” He took this position despite the explanations of Mrs. Sarr Géneviève, the law professor supervising the young people in the project, who countered with the argument of consent. But Abdoulaye had fixed ideas. Along with him, by the way, several other young people
including Anzoumana Diedhou, a first-year student in English, defended marriage between relatives. “I am djola (people of Casamance). When you give your daughter to someone else, for example to a samba, who is not going to respect you, it is better that he be a relative...,” he said, putting an end to the argument. What may surprise more than a few in this case is the fact that young people are the ones defending these traditions. But Abdoulaye Sy from Fouta continued to wonder “if others have the right to judge one’s culture.”

In this chapter, I proposed an analysis of women’s issues as a particular configuration deploying itself within a specific and circumscribed space-time. I described its activists, organizations, spaces, tensions, and blind spots. As at previous WSF events, the gap between the numerically massive participation of women and the limited place reserved for their cause was very visible in Dakar. Activists indeed adopted several strategies to counter this marginalization: participation in WSF organization (Gender and Fairness Committee), organization of semi-autonomous events or spaces, strategies for speaking at key forum activities (co-organization and speeches at the assembly of social movements, for example), etc. Nevertheless, my aim here has not been to assess the progress of women’s issues within the WSF dynamic. Rather, I tried to highlight the fact that the dynamics that are shaping the women’s issues within the WSF exceed, by far, women’s issues themselves and require a more grounded approach. In particular, it appears that the connection between African women’s movements (the trajectories, topics, and strategic options at once highly differentiated and yet all marked by development) on the one hand, and the alter-global sphere on the other is by no means obvious. To study women’s issues in Dakar required to question this link rather than take it for granted and examine how African women’s movements seized the forum space to deploy various strategies, only some of which related to women’s issues. Indeed, in a context marked by strong “NGOization” of civil societies and their extreme dependence on donors from the North, continental women’s movements strove not only to “engender” the WSF in Dakar, but also to grasp – in multiple ways – a new space full of opportunities, while dealing with the moral tensions that traverse Senegalese society today, aimed particularly at issues of gender and sexuality.

25 Consulted on May 13, 2013 at the following address: http://africansocialforum.org/actualo/images/docs/flammes/fsm/dakar/FLAMMEDAFRIQUE03.pdf.