

CONSTRUCTING PLURAL SOLIDARITIES

Semanur Karaman

- *Women, trans* and intersex
activisms and struggles* •

ABSTRACT

Reflecting on two recent initiatives from the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) – the #PracticeSolidarity campaign and the 13th International AWID Forum held in Brazil in September 2016 – Semanur Karaman considers the elements in creating plural solidarities for women, trans and intersex activists and struggles. Through drawing on her own experience and that of her fellow activists, she notes firstly the importance of viewing the issue through the lens of intersectionality. She goes on to describe how solidarities can be created and stresses the importance of tailor made approaches as well as the requirement for trust, openness and creativity. Semanur does not shy away from setting out the tensions that can be involved in this process - for example the sense of unfairness which can manifest or the fact that solidarity is not evenly distributed across the struggles and movements. Drawing on inspirational examples throughout, Semanur concludes by emphasising that solidarities must be wellbeing-centered and accessible to all women, trans* and intersex activists regardless of language, socio- economic factors or other obstacles.*

KEYWORDS

Solidarity | Trans* | Feminism | Intersex | Movement building

In June 2016, the young feminist activism programme at AWID launched a campaign named #PracticeSolidarity. The idea is to explore what solidarity means for young feminists across gender, racial, economic, social and ecological justice movements. Through a call for blogs and a tweetathon, young feminists have been generating immense feminist knowledge on different solidarities. They have been reflecting on their own experiences, while encouraging feminist and women's rights movements to reimagine and critically analyse solidarities, while expanding on why it is important and what it looks like.

What has transpired in the campaign blogs, tweets and conversations is that **practising solidarities requires being committed to the hard work of analysing the issue through an intersectional feminist lens** and recognising that solidarity is about more than just listening and learning but rather giving real space for historically excluded communities to speak for themselves.

During the campaign, Tatiana Sibrián from El Salvador, wrote: “We understand that the feminist movement cannot be driven by and for a homogeneous group of women, and that within feminism there is no such thing as homogeneity nor uniqueness. We owe this understanding to the women who split off from the original feminist movement, opening up possibilities for rethinking, understanding, and building a better feminism.” She emphasised the importance of respecting differences and cautioned us to avoid “flattening anything that might seem different, and to incorporate new paradigms into feminism which may enable us to make progress in the direction we would like to go.”

The 13th International AWID Forum, held last September in Salvador (Brazil), was another opportunity for our movements to practise and reflect upon solidarity. It brought together more than 1,800 activists, donors, members of organised civil society and social movements, as well as policy makers, with the aim of celebrating gains and collectively building strategies to confront new challenges through cross-movement solidarity. Although cross-movement solidarity encompasses a kaleidoscope of experiences, as diverse as the Forum participants themselves, it can be defined as practices that create the space for activists working in different contexts, geographies and on vastly different yet interconnected causes to come together, share experiences, learn from each other's strategies, map lessons learned and strategise on collective action. Here, we share some of the insights that came from this experience.

During the AWID Forum, “feelings” and “experiences” were used as instruments to open ourselves up in order to share insights and experiences, and reflect on our strategies and those used by others. Reflecting on this experience, Barbara Sostaita wrote about how **feelings are active components of building solidarity** in a collective pursuit of dismantling racist, heteronormative, capitalist patriarchy: “feelings mattered. Those deep, internal, ancestral parts of ourselves were celebrated as producers of knowledge and agents of change.” The validity of feelings as active agents of building transnational solidarity for activists and movements was echoed throughout the 13th AWID Forum.

It must be noted, however, that **not all feelings provoked by solidarity are uplifting**. Amal Elmohandes, an Egyptian feminist activist from Nazra for Feminist Studies expressed that, while “solidarity can transcend all forms of injustices”, the way the practice is experienced may highlight the unfairness of certain activists’ situations, especially in environments where they operate under substantial risks and obstacles, and therefore feel “cruel”. Amal was referring to a team of eleven feminist activists from Nazra who felt it was unfair and cruel that they were receiving all the love and appreciation for Mozn Hassan, executive director of the organisation, who could not attend to the AWID Forum as a result of a travel ban. Since 27 June 2016 Mozn has been banned from travelling outside Egypt within the context of Case 173, from 2011, known as the “NGO Foreign Funding Case”. This is due to her decades long activism combatting sexual violence in Egypt’s public space, advocating for gender justice and legal reform at the national level, and active regional solidarity within Middle East and North Africa.

In a similar note, even though solidarity can be protective in the face of risks, it is not necessarily healing. Being a feminist activist from Turkey, I was relocated last year thanks to transnational feminist solidarity in response to an intensified crackdown on dissidents in my home country. My relocation was a preventative tactic, rather than a reactive one, and did not wait for tragic events to unfold before action was required. I have been thankful ever since. However, knowing I had the privilege to relocate, while my friends and allies who are under more severe risks than I am are still operating inside the country, has left me grappling with guilt. The type of transnational feminist solidarity I have access to, which others do not, prompted me to agree with Amal, that the way solidarities are practised can prompt us to think that the practice itself “feels” cruel, especially when solidarity is not accessible and equitable to all who experience risks, threats, violations and restrictions. Which brings us to the issue of scarcity: solidarity is not only a tactic, but a resource that is not equally distributed in our struggles and movements. The amount and form of solidarity that individuals receive in relation to their activisms and the wider social movements they are a part of is very much linked to whether or not women, trans* and intersex activists can access audiences or whether their story is recognised and picked up by national, regional or international organisations. This is also quite dependent on whether or not activists have multiple language skills and resources required to establish channels of communication and support.

Another related insight concerns the plurality of scenarios lived by activists. Transnational solidarity for women, trans* and intersex human rights defenders should be as intersectional as the identities and struggles we embody in our existence. It should, therefore, **be tailor made, lest it leads to increased risk**. Between 2-13 May 2016, AWID held an online global discussion on imagining safety and wellbeing as deliberate tactics to sustain our movements. During the discussion women, trans* and intersex activists encouraged our global community to re-imagine our needs with a critical eye. Queer activist Athini from South Africa affirmed that solidarity requires “a culturally sensitive approach to issues dealing with grassroots activism, a sense of respect for who you are and what you bring to the process and an understanding of who you are as a woman, age, race or nationality and

the different kinds of countries you are expected to work in.” Chamkeli, a trans activist from Pakistan backed this statement by explaining that in Pakistan, solidarity that gives greater visibility to LGBTI activists is counterproductive, putting them at greater risk. Chamkeli says they prefer having local and international “friends” and media contacts who do not only engage in solidarity with LGBTI activists but also actively advocate with them against threats and risks. Chamkeli stresses the importance of “friend” instead of “ally”, or “colleague”, since, for her, **solidarity requires trust and a sense of familiarity between parties who engage in it.**

Furthermore, the diversity of contexts experienced by activists should also be reflected in the way we relate to each other, with respect for tradition and uniqueness, but also **openness for mutual social learning.** During a learning exchange between IM-Defensoras (a Meso-American WHRD network) and the Coalition of Women Human Rights Defenders in the Middle East and North Africa (WHRD MENA Coalition) in December 2015 on strategies and lessons learned in relation to regional responses risks, threats and violations that WHRDs experience in MENA and Meso America, some participants were curious to know why some women choose to cover their hair. A participant from the WHRD MENA Coalition responded that “it is perfectly ok to ask each other questions when we are interested in each other’s culture and want to genuinely know one another, as long as we are respectful. It is important, however, not to exoticize one another.” Consorcio Oaxaca, from the IM-Defensoras network, reaffirmed the importance of celebrating collective struggle, while ultimately respecting traditions and ways of working that are unique to certain histories and contexts when they encouraged us to celebrate murals painted by women, trans* and intersex activists in Oaxaca which commemorate their losses and celebrate achievements. On the value of the learning exchange, Consorcio Oaxaca, described how “these kinds of experiences make us stronger and broaden our outlook on the multiple ways of working. We are filled with the necessary energy to continue working on a new way of social coexistence.”

Such contexts make it clear that **solidarities can and should be creative in the face of injustice.** Mozn’s absence at the Forum inspired the participants to draft hundreds of messages in multiple languages on colorful post-it notes for her. Just because the Egyptian authorities banned Mozn Hassan from travelling, it did not mean she could not be a part of the learning, healing and sharing which took place at the Forum. She could not be there physically, but was very much present in our feelings, actions and thoughts. Mozn’s friends prepared a two-minute documentary through which Forum participants had the opportunity to learn more about the struggle that Mozn faces, and share hugs and tears. The words of a queer activist who watched the documentary still echo: “I don’t know her enough. But I am in solidarity. Because I know her struggle, it is the same one I fight for in Colombia.” The colorful post-its with messages of support boarded a plane from Salvador to Cairo, along with photos of a beautiful mural by IM-Defensoras, celebrating Mozn’s identity and activism, which in return enabled her to experience, in her own words, “solidarity and love.”

Solidarity is a resource that needs to centre on the wellbeing of women, trans* and intersex activists while providing strategies to reduce risks, threats, violations and restrictions. It should prompt us to question deep colonial and patriarchal leanings that are embedded within our identities through social learning. What the experiences and reflections described above make clear is that, for solidarities to be effective, we need to develop wellbeing-centered approaches while also making solidarities accessible to all women, trans* and intersex activists who are barred due to language, socio-economic factors or other obstacles. And while doing so, we need to understand solidarities are plural and need to be developed on a tailor made basis responding to our diverse identities and struggles. Trust built on feminist principles is vital to cross movement solidarities and prompting healing, learning and sharing



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Received in October de 2016.

Original in English.



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