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## TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM AND THE STRUGGLE FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE

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Capitalist globalisation has had a profound yet contradictory impact on women's lives, and on the possibilities for contesting male domination in both the core and periphery of the world capitalist system. On the one hand, older forms of male dominance are being undermined; on the other, women's life conditions are getting worse.

Capitalist penetration into the rural periphery has disrupted the settled economies that supported 'classic patriarchy' — a system in which men's power rests economically and politically on male property ownership and household headship.<sup>1</sup>

In the cities of the periphery, the 'Fordist gender regime' — the male breadwinner / female housewife household — which emerged in the sixties and seventies, the 'golden age' of economic development in some parts of the South, is crumbling as male wage and salary earners no longer earn a family wage. At the same time, based in part on women's incorporation into wage labour and their access to literacy and education, feminism has emerged as an organised political force. Women from the global South are mounting challenges in their countries and participating in a global feminist movement that is capable of affecting the policies of transnational organisations such as the UN and the European Union (EU).<sup>2</sup>

Yet, women and children, more than men, are victimised by global capitalist restructuring. Economic insecurity and impoverishment, exposure to toxics, degradation of water, high infant and maternal mortality rates, forced migration, increased hours spent in paid and unpaid work are only some indicators of women's burdens worldwide.<sup>3</sup> Women's organisations defending working class women and the rural and urban poor find themselves in a contradictory field of power relations defined by three contesting forces : national states, religious fundamentalist movements, and the global centres managing the neoliberal agenda.

Third World governments are male-dominated, often inefficient, plagued by cronyism and sometimes corrupt; the pressures of structural adjustment programmes

imposed on them by the IMF and the World Bank have only aggravated these tendencies. Their failure to deliver on the promised benefits of 'free-market' policies has spurred the growth of religious fundamentalist political movements that target feminism and challenge governmental power. National governments respond to these movements with both political repression and accommodation, primarily at women's expense — for example, ceding local civil authority to religious courts and leaders. Such policies shore up traditional patriarchy in its social control functions while the capitalist transformation of local economies deprive women of whatever protection and security patriarchal systems did provide.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the weakened and male-dominated national state and the fundamentalist movements, key institutions of the neoliberal order, pre-eminently the World Bank but also government agencies of Northern countries such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), proclaim their support for modernisation and democratisation. Offering resources for women's economic development efforts, social services, and healthcare, the managers of the New World economic order present themselves as allies of liberal feminism.

Central feminist aspirations — full political citizenship, equal access to education and occupational opportunity, and an end to the culturally and legally authorised right of men to control women's bodies, sexuality, and reproductive potential — are fully compatible with neoliberalism. The forces that have the most to lose from the institutionalisation of liberal feminism's political goals are organisations representing groups threatened by the loss of older forms of patriarchal political and economic power. For example Islamic governments, conservative Muslim NGOs, the Vatican and Catholic organisations, the Protestant evangelicals, and the International Right to Life Committee.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, a neoliberal economic order will never usher in gender equality. But just as capitalism offers more room for self-determination and self-organisation for people than does feudalism, so too does the neoliberal gender order allow women more room to engage in public life and to contest with men for power and place. Yet in the South, as in the North, women's responsibilities in care-giving disadvantage them in relation to men within the increasingly competitive and individualised economic and political worlds associated with the demands of global capitalism. This continuing differential relationship of men and women to the important and necessary labour of care-giving — work that is increasingly privatised because of the demise of the welfare state — is preserving male dominance albeit in a new form.<sup>6</sup>

In this situation, feminists who want to create a movement that reflects the needs and interests of working class and poor rural and urban women, face intense and difficult political dilemmas. These can be analysed in three terms. One, relations of class and racial domination reproduced or diminished among feminist organisations both transnationally and within national polities. Two, the particular pressures facing women's NGOs and the possibilities for resistance as well as co-optation. And, three, the lines of tension and alliances between the global feminist and Global Justice Movements (GJMs).

### **Feminist Politics in the Space between Patriarchal Nationalism and Neo-colonialism**

Organised feminism has been most effective locally and globally in promoting liberal political

rights for women and in raising issues that previously were invisible — such as sexual assault and domestic violence — and that got them into national politics as well as formal politics.<sup>7</sup>

Feminists face the difficult and pressing is — at the same time that it offers opportunities for escaping from traditional male control.

In the US, women of colour challenged white feminists to recognise that their categories of analysis assumed the universality of white, middle-class experience and defined equality and opportunity in ways that marginalise the political interests of working class women and women of colour. Similarly, women from the neo-colonised South have challenged the dominant voice of women from the North.

Since the World Conference of the International Women's Year in Mexico City convened by the UN in 1975, international feminism has debated how to define women's interests. An important development is the adoption of a 'human rights' platform as an organising agenda that women can co-operate on transnationally and use locally. At the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights, women's groups — arguing that "Human Rights are Women's Rights and Women's Rights Are Human Rights" — called on the Conference to recognise "gender based violence as a violation of human rights requiring immediate action".

This effort included promoting the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the UN in 1979. Nationally, women's organisations have used the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, expanded by the UN in 1966 to include economic, social, and cultural rights, to demand accountability from their governments. However, as might be expected, given the current dominance of capitalist class forces, in practice, only political and civil rights have real support, while women's social rights, along with those of men, are increasingly violated and marginalised by the destruction of public services at the core and periphery.

Raising concerns about human rights as a political discourse is in no way an endorsement of cultural relativism — women from the global South are only too well aware of how assertions of cultural difference could be used to legitimate patriarchal practices. They are also very well aware of the need to defend their nations and cultures against Northern hegemony — that treats western practices as the measure of progress for women and for society and thus legitimises neo-colonial domination. Northern feminists have participated in this kind of 'universalising' political discourse, and denied that modernisation shaped by non-western cultures might offer women more dignity, power, and respect. In this, they have made it easier for anti-feminist forces in the Third World to define feminism as a part of the Northern imperial project.

A good example of the co-optation of 'women's rights' for imperialist purposes is George Bush's claim that the US war on Afghanistan was carried out to promote human rights for Afghan women. The ground for this claim was laid in part by the international women's rights campaign begun in 1997 by a coalition of Northern women's rights organisations.<sup>8</sup> The campaign called on the international community to deny investment and recognition to the Taliban, completely ignored the complicity of the North in the installation of the Taliban in the first place, and the ways in which Washington's tolerance of Taliban rule was bound up in its overall neoliberal, geo-political agenda.

Under the leadership of Third World feminists, some organisations have tried to

chart a course between patriarchal nationalism and colonising feminism. For example, the network, Women Living Under Muslim Law (WLUML) challenges religious / political fundamentalism from within an Islamic framework of discourse, re-defining, just as men have done historically, what constitutes an 'Islamic' practice. Radhika Coomaraswamy asks how human rights can be protected at the local level while avoiding being pawns of imperial strategy. She proposes two criteria. One, any practice that causes severe pain and suffering to the women concerned should be criminalised. And other practices should be evaluated through debate, dialogue and coalition-building by the women of the particular society who have "in different ways fought racism and communalism but who also struggle against patriarchy and for women's rights. Even within this group there are big differences".<sup>9</sup>

The proper role of feminist organisations in the imperialist core countries is to support this local dialogue respectfully, and with resources. Who defines women's interests and rights ? The feminist insistence that freedom from sexual violence is a woman's human right offers an obvious basis for cross-class alliance. Yet, working class and poor women in the global South often shape their understandings of male violence in class terms. They locate it as an issue within a particular social context — for example in relation to government promotion of liquor sales to impoverished districts or rising unemployment and the disappearance of traditional male work. In contrast, middle class advocates translating international human rights politics into the local arena, are more likely to focus on the need for changing laws and police practices in isolation from the broader causes of violence against women.<sup>10</sup>

For its organisational growth, global feminism has depended on funds not from grassroots membership, but from institutions such as the UN, social democratic governments in the North, and private foundations in the capitalist core countries. In the early nineties, the United Nations, certainly as a consequence of feminist pressure from within, committed to funding the involvement of local women's groups in the national conferences projected to address development issues.<sup>11</sup>

External funding has several consequences. Within the Third World, women's NGOs rely on external funding sources. When grassroots groups become social movement organisations, and then primarily advocates for rather than mobilisers of their constituency, an inevitable process of professionalisation and bureaucratisation takes place. External funding has only aggravated this process. Some organisations have done better than others in maintaining connection with and accountability to their social base.<sup>12</sup>

However, stratification among women's groups has grown as those with elite ties, access to international funders, and the organisational characteristics that funders want to support are able to command more resources and political influence. In their structural position vis-à-vis their national states and international funders, these NGOs became advisors and gender 'experts' who play a brokering role between the state and its clientele.<sup>13</sup>

### NGOs, Popular Feminism and the Problems of Cross-class Alliances

In the sixties and seventies, even though political rights were relatively circumscribed, some development surplus was directed toward expansion of basic services particularly education and health care, which lowered maternal and infant mortality rates in many countries. The struggle for collective or social rights has been fundamental

to the political mobilisation of women in the working class, urban and rural poor and indigenous communities. The declining standards in urban living, destruction of rural livelihoods and the shrinking of the state under Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed by the IMF created a virtual explosion of women's activism over the last two decades.

This activism has three characteristics. It is an activism motivated by survival needs; it is based in cross-household networks of mutual help and supported by communitarian values; it is legitimated by women's traditional gender roles, and at the same time expanded to include women's engagement in public life, separate from men. A politics based on maternal care does not challenge traditional gender roles, and may even reinforce women's identification with motherhood. But it can lead grassroots activists to challenge male power and re-shape gender identities — if it takes place in a context which includes feminist ideas about women's rights in relation not only to the state but to the men in their own communities, households, and movement organisations.<sup>14</sup>

In the seventies and early eighties, struggles among women activists in the Third World and internationally, tended to counterpose a politics of women's needs to a politics of liberal (civil and political) rights, with working class / peasant women. They argued that collective and social rights are 'more important' to Third World women than individual civil rights.

This conflict was in part determined by the encapsulation of women activists in the politics of the traditional organs of working class / popular political mobilisation — labour unions, organisations of the unemployed, Left political parties, and peasant organisations. Over time, grassroots women's groups emerged from the struggles of poor rural and urban women, and women in the new proletariat of the free trade zones developed their own versions of a working class / popular feminism. Moving out from under the masculinist politics of local social and political movements, they began to address issues of sexual politics and to develop distinctive feminist modes of organising : consciousness raising, participatory decision-making, and attention to personal empowerment as a basis for collective empowerment.<sup>15</sup>

This political evolution would have been truncated without the existence of transnational feminist organising. Regional and international gatherings gave locally marginal women's grassroots organisations moral and practical support. Middle class / elite women were the first to articulate a programme for women's equality and participation, and to identify new targets of feminist contestation broadly understood as 'sexual politics'. Although originating outside the working class, these feminist organisations create an environment in which a different kind of feminist politics among women of the working class, peasantry, and urban poor is possible.

However, these organisations can also play a very negative role — by reproducing relations of class privilege and domination within movements, framing feminist ideology and strategy within the limits of a liberal political project, and entering into conservative alliances with political and economic elites. An example of the latter is the proliferation of NGOs in the global South managing programmes of small-scale loans — microcredit — for women. Although the 1995 Beijing Platform of Action proposed a broad range of reforms and interventions to improve women's position in Third World economies, women's

NGOs have been most successful in promoting microcredit programmes. Initiated by USAID and the World Bank, these programmes have garnered the vast majority of development funds targeted toward women. Microcredit has increased women's integration into the informal sectors of the economy, but women often exploit their own children, especially their daughters, in order to get their work done. This increases competitive relationships among women, and does little to lift women or their families out of poverty.<sup>16</sup>

Ideologically, microcredit reinforces the neo-colonial view that ascribes to Third World women both moral characteristics and personal powers that alleviate the need for state-controlled and regulated development. In valorising 'grassroots' women's maternal virtues and survival strengths, NGOs argue for targeting women as the 'best investment' for development funds. Since men are less likely than women to pay back loans, more likely to spend their income on themselves rather than their households, and to participate in the petty corruption that is a route to local political influence, these claims have real force.

On the other hand, like all powerful ideologies, microcredit also rests on a very partial picture and has the unintended consequence of further solidifying the neoliberal agenda. Third World women are set up as a reproach, not to the forces of capitalist domination, but to those who supposedly lack their courage and determination to negotiate the market, that is, the 'dependent' men of poor countries who have relied on the State to protect them from the competitive challenges of the market.

The emergence of the 'microcredit industry' indicates how NGOs staffed by women from privileged strata in the Third World find avenues for employment, international travel, and political influence through work in which they project themselves as representatives of women who are marginalised and excluded from the new economic order. Women advocates for women are forced to inhabit a niche that is simultaneously empowering and disempowering — incorporating women's representatives into state resource allocation processes at the cost of distancing them from their social base and shoring up, rather than contesting, neoliberal ideologies and policies. Similar kinds of pressures face NGOs working in the arena of women's reproductive rights.

### Reproductive Rights

Since the fifties under pressure from the World Bank, USAID, and other development agencies, developing countries began implementing population control programmes, designed to lower women's fertility 'by any means necessary', and their myriad abuses have been well documented.<sup>17</sup> Since the seventies, international networks of feminists, working through NGOs and the United Nations, sought to shift the focus from fertility to the promotion of health and well being of women and children. Establishing links between economic development, women's personal autonomy (education, maternal and child healthcare, changes in family law, etc.), they suggested such programmes would be an improvement in women's lives and also result in a decline in their fertility.

This transnational feminist effort achieved a significant victory at the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, which adopted a 'Platform of Action' affirming women's reproductive rights and specifically condemning government policies driven by numerical population targets. The Platform also endorsed

the neoliberal assault on the State, calling for greater reliance on the private sector and NGOs for service delivery.

While achieving considerable success at the level of theoretical vision and UN (and even World Bank) rhetoric, NGOs have been entirely unsuccessful in promoting women's reproductive rights in practice at the national level. Across the Third World, fertility rates have plunged, in many cases achieving, just in 20 years, a demographic transition that took close to a century in the West. Economic transition and structural adjustment in the South have produced a 'crisis-led fertility decline'. The causes of this decline are complex and reflect, at least in part, women's own desires to control their reproductive lives, increasing demand for women's labour, and aggressive family planning promotion that has made sterilisation operations, IUD insertions, and hormone-based contraceptives easily available. However, the rapidity and depth of this change is also the result of more negative factors such as women's impoverishment and rise in female-headed households. Also increasing demands on women's working days, reducing their exposure to unprotected heterosexual contact, women's appropriate fears of the health risks of pregnancy, including maternal mortality (the result of illegal abortions), compromised health status from poverty, and lack of access to pre- and post- natal healthcare.<sup>18</sup>

Although numerical targets may no longer drive government programmes, abuses of women's basic bodily rights continue to pervade the system. The overall institutional context so severely restricts women's choices as to be inherently, if not purposively, coercive. Rates of sterilisation among poor women, and especially poor women in racially oppressed communities, are far higher than among women who are racially and economically privileged.<sup>19</sup>

### Feminism in the Global Justice Movement

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the managers of global capitalism, meeting at the Davos World Economic Forum (WEF), were forced to acknowledge a deep crisis of legitimacy in the neoliberal order.<sup>20</sup> Halfway around the globe, in Porto Alegre, activists gathered at the WSF, sought to create a political agenda for the GJM, that had put global elites on the defensive. The participation of women as leaders and as representatives of grassroots movements at the WSF holds real promise, as does the involvement of feminist organisations in the organisational networks that constitute local anti-globalisation forces.

Thirty years ago, it was unthinkable, even within radical social movements, to have women in leadership over men or to have issues of gender oppression anything other than a matter for a woman's auxiliary. Organisations that command most widespread respect for their militancy, revolutionary vision, and courage are deeply influenced by feminism — in their political agendas and their leadership cadres. For example, in 1993, following a process of convening local women's committees and holding hundreds of community assemblies, the Zapatista Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee in Mexico passed the Revolutionary Laws of Women. This programme of women's rights includes their right to decide the number of children they will have and care for, their right to work and receive a just salary, the right to choose their partners, and so forth.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, there are areas of tension between transnational feminism and other parts of the GJM. Reflecting a complex set of forces, these 'fault lines' cannot be fully analysed

here. But, I give two examples of problems that the GJM will have to resolve. One, tensions between women's NGOs and labour unions, and two, strategic silences on the issue of abortion and sexual orientation.

### **Women's NGOs and the Labour Movement**

Due to gender specific reasons, traditional modes of union organising have not been effective in organising women workers. Successful strategies are those that cross over the public / private and work / family divides, acknowledging women's care-giving responsibilities and strong ties to their communities. Women workers are joining trade unions across the globe, but NGOs, sometimes formed by women workers leaving male-dominated unions, and sometimes created when no unions were interested have also stepped in and these represent an important constituency of the working-class movement. Given the limited opportunities for women in the formal labour market, NGOs are striving to preserve women's jobs in the labour-intensive industries that will hire them, while they organise to improve wages and working conditions.

NGOs have tended to rely more on community organising, moral persuasion, international funding, and political support than on union dues and traditional weapons of struggle, especially the strike. Labour unions, unsympathetic to the reasons for the NGOs' strategic choices, have failed to enter into supportive alliances with grassroots organisations of women workers, driving the NGOs further away from the trade union movement. And NGOs have become more vulnerable to co-optation by management-dominated international 'watchdog' committees, which have become a major tool for transnational corporations responding to the anti-sweatshop movement.<sup>22</sup>

### **Silences in Community-based Movements**

Women's activism in community-based movements over the last two decades reflects historic continuity. For centuries, women have entered political struggle to secure the livelihoods of their families and communities. In addition to demanding resources from local government, many communities began to engage in alternative modes of production and provision of services — co-operative work schemes to produce food and clothing, building crèches and houses, organising trash collection, etc.<sup>23</sup>

Women's leadership has emerged in these struggles and incorporation of feminist demands into their political programmes, especially where community-based organisations are part of broader movements that carry radical political worldviews (eg., the Zapatistas in Mexico or the Workers Party in Brazil). These developments reflect tremendous gains and offer great hope. Within the GJM, some feminist political ideas and demands are more easily expressed than others, for example, the progress made on domestic violence and the silence on the issues of abortion and sexual orientation.

This could be because some feminist demands are more compatible with maternalist politics — the right to be free from domestic violence or to birth control and child spacing and can be framed in ways that preserve the essential relationships of the traditional heterosexual family. Fertility control can and has often been allied to claims about preserving the health of mothers and children. The notion that men have an

obligation to care for women in their families — and should not expect to retain familial authority if they violate that obligation — is not fundamentally antagonistic to paternalistic gender norms.

Make no mistake : both these shifts in understanding substantially expand women's power and authority within marital relationships and represent a victory for feminism. But as difficult as these changes have been to make, abortion has generated far more opposition to feminism. Abortion could be regarded as simply a form of contraception (and is in some societies framed as 'menstrual regulation'). But it has come to be defined as an act of maternal rejection and a powerful symbol of women's ability to separate (hetero) sexuality from procreation and to claim sexual pleasure for its own sake. The validation of lesbian sexuality goes even further in the direction of denying the inevitable, natural, and moral status of families organised around a heterosexual bond.

A second possible reason for silences around issues central to sexual liberation could be the role of religious organisations, particularly the Catholic Church, in providing institutional and monetary support to popular movements. It might appear that their constituents' religiosity inhibits the political issues that organisers can raise. But illegal abortion is a fact of life for many Catholic women who find ways to make abortion compatible with their religious beliefs.<sup>24</sup> I would argue that it is the dependence of organisations on the Catholic hierarchy for funding and political legitimacy, rather than their women constituents' religious beliefs that enforces this code of silence.

### Conclusion

Conflicts and tensions around gender relations and feminist politics within the GJM offer hope as well as words of caution. Conflicts exist because women activists and their organisations are serious players on the political stage, contesting male dominance not as outsiders but from within the networks of the GJM. Whether feminism will come to inform the radical vision and the everyday politics of global justice activists depends on how well the movements are able to sustain political coalitions that are participatory and willing to engage in dialogue. Movements that make a space for the political and strategic interventions of working class and popular feminist activists and their organisations will constitute a powerful pole of attraction, an alternative for those who now believe they have no choice but to compromise with the neoliberal order.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gordon and Hunter, 1998; Kandioyi, September 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Where 114 women's organisations attended the first UN sponsored women's NGO forum in Mexico City in 1975, 3,000 came to Beijing in 1995. Today, tens of thousands of NGOs participate in international conferences and gatherings. See Basu, Autumn 2000, p 73.

<sup>3</sup> Bandarage 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Feldman, Summer 2001, p 1108; Raj et al, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Basu, year p 72.

<sup>6</sup> For more on this argument, see Brenner 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Basu, p 81.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p 73.

<sup>9</sup> Coomaraswamy, 2002

<sup>10</sup> Meridians : feminism, race, transnationalism, Autumn 2002, p 16.

<sup>11</sup> Basu, p 76. For the US, see Beth E. Richie, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Basu, p. 74. Major US foundation grants to women's organisations working for women's rights and against violence against women increased thirteen-fold between 1988 and 1993. In the two years prior to the Beijing summit in 1995, the Latin American and Caribbean Regional NGO Coordination received \$1,007,403 from the UN. See Alvarez, Autumn 2000, p16.

<sup>13</sup> Thayer 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Alvarez, pp 55-58.

<sup>15</sup> Petchesky and Judd, p 310.

<sup>16</sup> Townsend et al, 1999; Corcoran-Nantes, 2000; Alvarez, pp 36-37.

<sup>17</sup> Mindry, Summer 2001, pp 1187-1212; Poster and Salime, 2002, pp 189-219.

<sup>18</sup> Hartmann, 2002, pp 259-284.

<sup>19</sup> Bandarage, pp 170 and 183.

<sup>20</sup> In Brazil's Northeast, an impoverished region with a large Black population, the proportion of women using sterilisation for contraception increased by 16.49 per cent between 1986 and 1992, by which time 64.39 per cent of contracepting women were 'choosing' sterilisation. In the same period, mortality showed a dramatic increase. Thayer, p 228.

<sup>21</sup> Bello, 2001, p xv; Bayes and Kelly, 2001, pp 160-161.

<sup>22</sup> Mendez, 2002, pp 121-141.

<sup>23</sup> Ortega, Amuchastegui and Rivas, 1998, pp 145-147.

<sup>24</sup> Diniz et al, 1998, pp 61-62.