

A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of small grey dots, with several larger red dots scattered throughout, primarily in the left and right sides of the page.

Feminisms on the Move

Against the Backlash, Towards New Solidarities

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- Gender is once again a highly contested area in many societies and cultures. Feminisms face a massive backlash by neo-conservative, fundamentalist religious, and right-wing populist forces. These controversies need feminist responses and require the repoliticisation of feminist issues and new solidarities across the diversity of feminisms and their growing fragmentation.
- Feminisms have a lot of potential and experience to inspire alliances and other movements with their rights and justice-oriented concepts, linkages between practical needs and strategic interests, emancipatory objectives and transformatory perspectives, and concepts of autonomous spaces, thinking outside the box, and transversal dialogues.
- Intersectionality can be used as an analytical and strategic tool to differentiate and politicise gender issues, to develop translocal and transnational solidarities, and to build strategic inclusionary alliances geared towards multiscalar justice. Feminisms can articulate themselves through other justice movements.
- Common points of reference as violence against women, loss of livelihood due to neo-liberal globalisation, care work, and food sovereignty are helping to create new solidarities between feminisms and for strategic alliance building with other social movements.

Feminisms: Diversity of Political Projects

Heated debates about the burka and burkini in Europe, abortion in Catholic countries, homosexuality in Africa, and women's role in Turkey and post-Arab Spring countries signal that the gender order is a contested area at the centre of all societies and cultures. These situations require feminist responses. This paper looks inward into the present diversity of feminisms and looks forward in order to explore perspectives, solidarities, and alliances.

Feminism is a theoretical and practical critique of gendered and other power relations with an emancipatory and transformatory perspective. It is not a blueprint, but a historic product and platform contingent on and interacting with historically specific social, political, economic, cultural, and religious contexts. It is diverse in theoretical approaches, activism, and movements with different roots and objectives, taking a variety of forms on multiple levels.

In the mid-1980s, Development Alternatives With Women for a New Era (DAWN), a network of feminists from the Global South, sought to counter the dominance of Western feminism and its claims of being advanced, capable of setting universal norms for women's emancipation and thus speaking for »others«. In this regard, it developed the concept of »a diversity of feminisms, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women, and defined by them for themselves. This diversity builds on a common opposition to gender oppression and hierarchy which, however, is only the first step in articulation and acting upon a political agenda« (DAWN. 1985: 13).

»The personal is political« became the key slogan of autonomous women's movements in the West in the 1970s. Politicisation referred mainly to the patriarchal order and subjectivities in the private sphere, e.g. sexuality, domestic violence, and housework. In the Global South, feminist movements linked the politicisation of gender issues to livelihoods and issues of survival. Aligning with other civil society forces, they challenged not only gender-based violence, subordination, and exploitation, but also power and hierarchies in class/caste regimes, in North-South-relations, and the hegemonic development and neo-liberal globalisation model. Common strategies of politicising in North and South were

to publicly expose what had been labelled as private, natural, or merely individual and to scandalise gendered discrimination and violence.

Feminist movements went beyond liberal demands for participation and inclusion of women in the mainstream of development, the market and money economy, and in politics. They claimed to be agents of change, seeking social transformation. Accordingly, the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists (2006) states, »By naming ourselves as Feminists we politicise the struggle for women's rights, we question the legitimacy of the structures that keep women subjugated, and we develop tools for transformatory analysis and action«.

Feminist concepts of rights and justice as well as politicised feminist struggles link individual and collective emancipation with the structural transformation of societies by intertwining recognition of identities, rights, and entitlements with the redistribution of resources and power.

Fragmented Movements, Ambivalent Women's Rights

The global topography of feminisms is currently characterised by heterogeneity and fragmentation, including queer, Black, Islamic, spiritual, eco, peasant, third wave, net, and many other feminisms. Stressing their own struggles and claiming their own spaces, the number of identity-based, local, and young feminist approaches is growing. Each generation and group wants to raise its own voice instead of being represented, make its own experiences, use new media, and develop other forms of articulation. Their strength lies in offering a sense of belonging, but they also run the risk to being exclusionary, self-centred, and apolitical. In addition, the NGOisation of women's movements has brought about a specialisation and professionalisation leading to new forms of organising and advocacy but also to competition for funds and public attention. This heterogeneity makes for controversies and tension between different generations and multiple identities, between autonomous and institutionalised approaches, between religious and secular schools of thought, and between femocrats in political institutions and grassroots activists.

In the 1990s, the women's human rights paradigm as the common framework for the politicisation of women's issues and for establishing global governance of gender equality at the United Nations worked as a vehicle and an engine for transnational networking and alliance building. It facilitated an empowering shift of perspective from women as victims to women as right holders, agents, and citizens. The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, appeared to be a golden opportunity to set up a »strategic sisterhood« based on »we women of the world« as political subject and co-construct the imaginary of a global feminist movement, diverse but united.

From a post-colonial perspective, however, Gayatri Spivak, a pioneering post-colonial scholar, has criticised both the concept of sisterhood and the women's human rights paradigm as being part of an »imperialist project« of Western feminists of »saving brown women« (Spivak 1988), giving preference to individual rights over collective rights and caught up in the missionary and »othering« thinking of North and South, developed and undeveloped, modern and traditional.

Backlash and Relocalisation

Successful feminist agenda setting by feminists has always caused resistance. In the 1990s at the UN level, the »unholy alliance« of the Vatican and Islamist states opposed sexual and reproductive rights. Recently, fundamentalist groups in Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism have been on the rise, linking up with authoritarian, nationalistic, and right-wing-populist forces. Anti-feminism and conservative familism, remilitarization of masculinity, and a focus on the reproductive role of women seem to be the glue that binds these tendencies in many countries of the North and South. Confrontations over dress codes and abortion have regained momentum. Hate speech targeting feminists, activists from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) communities, and scholars of gender studies is increasing. These anti-liberal and anti-democratic trends are producing a strong backlash against feminisms and shrinking spaces for civil society, including feminist groups.

At the same time, particular feminisms, e.g. popfeminism, and powerful women have become hip in the media and easy to commercialise as marketplace fem-

inism. Meanwhile, women's rights and the concept of empowerment have been instrumentalised by the World Bank and other institutions for the integration of women into markets and their adjustment to neo-liberal norms. These tendencies have led to a depoliticisation of feminist concerns. The transformatory perspective evaporated, as in the case of gender mainstreaming, which was conceptualised as a global strategy for institutional change but often resulted in being a rather technical exercise.

The various forms of rollback and the fragmentation of feminist movements, after the period of going global, induced their relocalisation to be able to resist the backlash, defend spaces, rights, and resources, and (re)politicise issues and struggles. Bottom-up activism makes new translocal and transnational networking and alliance building possible. A transnational example of this shift is the World March of Women, which takes place every five years. It was conceived as a cross-border grass-roots movement, countering the top-down policies from the United Nations and other global governance institutions. Focussing on two common issues, violence against women and poverty, it does not attempt to homogenise women's identity and concerns.

Old Networks, New Solidarities

Till today, women's human rights have been used as a powerful tool for the articulation of demands for gender justice, recognition, and redistribution and as reference system to hold states as well as actors in the private sphere and in the private sector accountable. Violence against women became the most significant common denominator among feminist movements, including domestic violence, dowry murders, rape as war crime, sex determination and femicide, female genital mutilation, so-called honour killings, hate crimes against LGBTI people, and so on. The struggle for the right to bodily integrity and for the designation of gender-based violence as a human rights violation enabled feminisms to bridge cultural and religious differences, gaps between grass-roots and elites, and tensions between mother and daughter generations.

According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), another post-colonial scholar who rejected any concept of sisterhood based on gender as identity, the current

key framework of reference for »reflective transnational solidarities« to be built by feminists is the global restructuring of economies and societies and experiences of loss of livelihoods, growing social inequalities, new forms of poverty, and precarisation of labour. Since the win-win-ideology of neo-liberal globalisation has lost a lot of its legitimacy around the world, there is now a chance to challenge the logic of these dynamics.

From a feminist economics perspective, discourses on care work are an important point of entry to question the rationale of capitalist markets and globalisation and to link gender and development issues. In 2012 on the occasion of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, the World March of Women announced, »We need to overcome this model of development. In order to achieve this, we must overcome the sexual division of labour which does not recognise our work as work«. In 2014 women from La Via Campesina presented their own »feminismo campesino popular,« which links the concept of food sovereignty with recognition of women's work, connects the struggle against violence against women with struggles against the structural violence of land grabbing, eviction, and commercial monocultures, and demands commons like collective land rights and a cosmopolitan-based model of economy. The link between caring and food has made for numerous alliances between feminist and other social movements. The precautionary principle deduced from the care concept has been introduced by feminists into biosafety and consumer-oriented movements and policies to counter reckless, profit-driven corporate business.

Following on the early debates about women's unpaid housework in the West and the importance of women's unpaid work as a shock absorber in crisis situations as well as in austerity and structural adjustment programmes in the South, feminists have challenged the devaluation of care work and the permanent care extractivism in all societies. An international alliance from the margins to the centre, from the local to the global, was the campaign for a convention on domestic labour that was adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2011. In 2012 in the Negombo Declaration, the South Asian Feminist Alliance demanded recognition, rights, and social security for the indispensable work that women do for social reproduction. Thus, the politicisation of care work has become a common

reference point for gender justice, redistribution, and recognition, on which alliances with alter-globalisation movements can be built.

Intersectionality and (Re-)Connectivity

Intersectionality can be used as a theoretical and analytical concept to understand the complexity, interwovenness, and interaction of different regimes of power and oppression, such as class/caste, gender, race, age, and abledness, in various contexts. Based on a contextualised analysis that takes into account the multiple identities and subjectivities of actors, intersectionality is a useful strategic tool to politicise issues and struggle for multiscale justice and transformation. These struggles are inclusive, go beyond single identities, and link resistances against various forms of hierarchies, privileges, and subordination. Intersectional approaches disperse the social category of gender and rearticulate it through other categories of inequality and power, e.g. ethnicity and colour. This is an appropriate starting point for strategic alliances with a broad range of actors and reflects a saying by Audre Lorde (1984:134-144): »There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives«.

The topography of feminisms is not power neutral but comprises various hierarchies, privileges, and exclusions, and these have to be addressed in overcoming divides, domination, and discrimination. Transversal dialogues between and across identities, religions, and nations respect differences and feelings of belonging but avoid essentialising and generalising them. Feminisms have always created spaces and opportunities for emancipation that link practical needs and strategic interests knowing well that to achieve social transformation, the self as well as societal structures have to be changed. This kind of experience is relevant to other movements, including anti-capitalist, environmental, peace, and anti-racist struggles.

Feminist experiences with autonomous spaces and thinking »outside the box« along with self-reflective transversal dialogues across differences and diversities were a source of inspiration for democracy movements, among them the Arab Spring, the 15M initiatives in Spain, and Right to the City campaigns. Muslim net feminists influence and enrich other anti-discrimination movements, such as anti-racist movements, the »welcome culture«

towards migrants and refugees, and LGBTI campaigns. Thus, feminisms can articulate and repoliticise themselves through other movements.

In 2010, the African Feminist Forum stressed the need to »reconnect with ourselves and our communities«, to overcome fragmentation and divisions. The feeling is widespread that over time, feminisms lost their holistic thinking and overview involving the intersectionality of power systems and local-global relations. They need to get over thinking and acting in silos and must reconnect issues, actors, and agency.

With right-wing populism, neo-conservatism, and religious fundamentalisms stressing gender and gender relations as centrepieces of the social, cultural, religious, and value orders of societies, a repoliticisation of feminist issues is in order for today. Rights and justice-based feminisms have great potential to challenge undemocratic, identitarian, and anti-liberal forces. In addition, if they articulate themselves in strategic alliances and new solidarities, they could regain legitimacy and strength.

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