



Transnational feminism revisited

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One of the liveliest debates in feminist circles involves naming, identifying, locating and evaluating the changing character of women's activism and its relationship to the state, NGOs and the transnational arena.

Feminist scholars writing about the global North and South are currently debating whether the trend towards increased collaboration with the state – and the concomitant shift of women's activism from the streets to institutions – has demobilised or reinvigorated women's movements. Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward once famously argued that states undermine protest when they partially concede to its demands (1979). The life cycle of social movements is thus shortened by the state's ability to regulate protest. More recently, however, scholars have argued that social movements have developed the capacity to outstrip state regulation. David Meyer and Sidney Tarrow speak of a "social movement society" in which increasingly diverse constituencies employ protest tactics to make a wider range of claims than before, at the same time that social movements are becoming professionalised and institutionalised (1998). Mary Katzenstein argues that women's activism has not disappeared, moving instead into such unlikely institutional spaces as the US military and the Catholic Church (1998). Some scholars have explored the ways that women "play the state" from within, as "femocrats", both by acting subversively within it and through their own individual creativity and resourcefulness. (For three very different approaches to this question, see Bumiller, 2005; Eisenstein, 1996; and Katzenstein, 1998.)

These contradictory claims prompt a range of questions. Under what conditions do movements enter institutions without forsaking their oppositional character? How do we know when a movement has been co-opted? Are institutional gains necessarily movement losses?

Along parallel lines, there have also been vigorous debates about whether links to transnational networks and organisations have strengthened or deradicalised women's movements. From one perspective, the development of

transnational networks represents a signal achievement – particularly for women in the South. For example, Valentine Moghadam argues that transnational networks are organising women around the most pressing questions of the day: reproductive rights, the growth of religious “fundamentalism”, and the adverse effects of structural adjustment policies. Moghadam also comments favourably on the recent emergence of transnational networks, which she believes have a broader and more far-reaching impact than local movements (1996). Yet other scholars claim that as women’s movements have become more transnational, their commitment to grassroots mobilisation and cultural change has diminished. Sonia Alvarez argues that women’s movements are becoming increasingly bureaucratised as they have come to work more closely with NGOs, political parties, state institutions and multilateral agencies (1998).

The provocative and thoughtful contributions by Shireen Hassim (2005) and Elaine Salo (2005) in *Feminist Africa* 4 significantly advance this debate. My comments take up the invitation that Hassim implicitly makes to non-specialists of South Africa when she suggests that the trends she observes might exist in other regions as well.


To rehearse their arguments briefly, Hassim examines the implications of the increased engagement of women’s movement activists with the formal institutions of the liberal democratic state and transnational networks. She argues that this has resulted in the dominance of an inclusionary reformist approach over a radical, transformational one, to the detriment of feminism. First, the movement of feminists into transnational organisations forces national and regional organisations to compete for increasingly meagre resources. Second, as the women’s movement has engaged the state, it has put more time and energy into upward rather than downward linkages, with the result that class and racial divisions between the women’s movement and the rest of South African society are deepened. Third, state institutions tend to treat questions concerning gender inequality as technical rather than cultural and political problems.

By contrast, Elaine Salo argues that inclusionary and transformational approaches are often complementary rather than contradictory. She notes that the fragmentation of the women’s movement may be an appropriate response to the emergence of new issues and groups, such as gay and lesbian rights and mobilisation. She also suggests that as a result of neoliberal reforms, class identifications may be supplanting racial identifications within the women’s movement.

What explains the changes in the character of the women’s movement that both Hassim and Salo identify, but evaluate differently? Although neither fully



address this question, they point towards different explanations. Hassim emphasises the importance of political factors, notably, concerning the creation of a democratic context in which new possibilities and dilemmas confront women's groups. She provides an implicit critique of the strategic choices made by the South African women's movement in deciding to work closely with state agencies. She suggests that the tensions between different fragments of the women's movement are the unfortunate result of the imperfect character of democracy in South Africa. By contrast, Salo gives more weight to economic forces, particularly the impact of neoliberal reforms on the South African economy, and the ways in which this has reshaped the class structure and limited the alternatives available to the women's movement.



Clearly, a confluence of factors has brought about the changes that both authors observe in the women's movement and its relationship to the state. The political changes in South Africa, as in many other postcolonial contexts, are vitally important. They include the end of the era of nationalist struggle and the participation of women's organisations in the state they helped to create, as a reward for and culmination of their efforts. The state's attention to questions of rights and citizenship has claimed the attention of the women's movement, with a concomitant change in its focus and priorities.

The economic changes resulting from the state's decision to pursue neoliberal economic policies are equally important. Here, the experience of the South African state stands apart from those of most postcolonial nations. South Africa achieved majority rule during an era of global neoliberalism, whereas most states in Asia, Africa and Latin America achieved independence between the 1950s and 1970s, a period during which such states generally had some commitment to effecting economic redistribution and social welfare. This is very different to the kinds of state policies South Africa has pursued since 1994.

This constellation of developments has had several important implications for the women's movement. At the very moment that the democratic state was encouraging women's participation and representation, the neoliberal context was sharply curtailing the extent to which women's organisations could obtain more services from the state. By contrast, the opportunities for women's organisations to achieve progressive change were much greater in the political domain. As Aili Mari Tripp (2005) points out in her article in *Feminist Africa* 4, women's movements have actively sought political incorporation, and Africa has some of the highest rates of women's political participation in the world as a result. To the extent that women's movements have pursued the strategy

of seeking women's political incorporation (based on the assumption that formal political rights are an important pre-condition for equitable social policies), this has not yet borne fruit.

Hassim and Salo implicitly agree that the women's movement has not been very effective in addressing the problems of poor women. For Salo, this is partially offset by the fact that the women's movement has become broader and more diverse. But surely there need not be a trade-off between a commitment to diversity and to equity. A group that is committed to addressing the rights of gays and lesbians, for example, could well address the interests and needs of poor gays and lesbians – as well as other poor women. More broadly, one might argue that the means employed by women's organisations can only be evaluated against their objectives. Whether working through the state and institutions represents an inclusionary or a transformational approach depends, among other things, on the movement's effectiveness in changing the conditions of women at the lowest level of the system of social stratification.

The second critical question raised by both essays is: what are the ideological and practical implications of the differences between an approach that is more radical and locally grounded as opposed to one that is more reformist and transnational? Here I would argue that it is important to disaggregate two issues that the authors tend to conjoin, namely the tension between local, regional and transnational approaches versus the tensions between reformist and radical approaches. Indeed, none of the evidence provided by Hassim and Salo shows that these two different vectors coincide. Hassim argues that community organisations tend to be more committed to transformational approaches than national or transnational organisations. This is probably true in most places most of the time; in part, as Hassim argues, because community organisations have a greater degree of autonomy from the state. Moreover, community organisations are less powerful than national ones. In general, the more powerful the institution, the less power women wield within it. Thus women are less apt to influence the workings of parliament than of local administrative bodies. The same is true of movements. For example, women are likely to wield less power in nationalist movements than in grassroots struggles.

However, it must also be noted that in recent years, communities and community organisations have emerged as bastions of conservatism. This has happened in both India and the US, where conservative religious organisations have organised at community levels and employed discourses of community to legitimate their demands. Moreover, when conservative administrations have been



in office, the state has often intervened in support of such groups and has also sought to cripple progressive groups, thereby undermining the autonomy of community organisations from the state.

Similarly, transnational organisations range from those like Jubilee South (mentioned by Salo) which are committed to challenging global inequalities, to very conservative groups committed to prohibiting abortion and curtailing reproductive rights. It is also important to distinguish between different kinds of transnational organisations – for example, those that function as donor organisations as opposed to those that create solidarity networks, which do not entail the cultivation of dependence on donor groups.

On the question of evaluating reformist as opposed to radical strategies, the key question concerns women's relationship with the state. As Hassim aptly notes, poor women are better off with a strong state committed to providing welfare and social services than a weak state, which can be dominated by market forces and conservative civil society groups. The challenge confronting women's groups is how to combine a strategy of engaging the state while simultaneously retaining sufficiently strong roots in civil society to place pressure on the state from without.

Women are most likely to use their power in transformative ways and to avoid being co-opted when they bring to the state a prior and ongoing connection to social movements. Activism within social movements involves the forging of collective identities, consciousness-raising and combativeness towards authorities, all of which enable movements to continue to influence women's identities and interests within institutions.

Women's connection to movements also provides a vital counterweight to the pull of institutions towards moderation and centrism. The question is how women's movements can maintain this dual focus of working from within and without. One possibility might be to use the structural autonomy of different fragments of the women's movement as a basis for increasing the movement's own autonomy. For example, there may be times when support from transnational organisations increases the leverage of the women's movement in its dealings with the state. At other times, community organisations may provide women's groups with more effective allies. Whichever the case may be, the fragmentation of the women's movement today is both liability and asset. Alas, history provides contradictory lessons about what pitfalls to avoid: unified, centralised movements are apt to be bureaucratised and conservative; decentralised, fragmented movements are apt to be ineffective. The challenge is how



to ensure that the diversity of women's movements is a strength, not a weakness; how to forge a strategy in which the whole is greater, rather than less, than the sum of the parts.

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