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Global Knowledge, Power and Social Change:
The Contribution of Transnational Feminist Movements


How do transnational feminist movements push the boundaries of neoliberalism and patriarchy? What are the advantages and challenges of working from within or outside these boundaries? In what ways have TFMs succeeded, and what work is still left to do?

This one and a half hour panel provided an opportunity for the contributors to the recently launched *Oxford Handbook of Transnational Feminist Movements* and the wider audience to discuss these questions and to bring up new questions and issues concerning feminist movements across the globe. With well over 100 people in attendance, including both budding and seasoned feminist scholars and activists, several important themes, concerns, and strategies were raised as the group informally articulated a state of the field on transnational feminist movements.

Facilitated by Dr. Wendy Harcourt from the ISS in The Hague, the “fishbowl setup” set particular parameters that shaped the group discussion. Four chairs were set up around a coffee table in the center of the room, while the wider audience was seated around the center. At any given time, three chairs were taken by speakers (at first, only contributors to the Handbook, and then open to the audience) who took turns discussing a question posed by the facilitator. Another person in the audience could take a seat in the fourth chair, requiring that someone else from the center stand up. In this way, only three people at a time were engaged in discussion, though the speakers rotated regularly. By the end of the panel, approximately 20-25 people had a chance to sit in the center and participate in the discussion, including feminists from China, Mexico, Uruguay, the Netherlands, South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Cameroon, Canada, Korea, Iran, and Sudan.

Speakers discussed several issues that have become especially concerning to transnational feminist movements. These included staggering rates of sexual violence; the expansion of militarism, war, and militarized masculinity; the political contestation over women’s bodies; the dominance of men and masculinity in development; racism and the invisibilization of coloniality in the lives of poor women; the suffering of women in Africa and their lack of access to education and resources; and drug addiction among women in Iran.

Participants noted numerous challenges that affect feminists’ ability to substantively address women’s oppression. For instance, the bureaucratization of many spaces in which feminists operate, such as academia, government agencies, the UN, and international nonprofits has created the tendency for feminists to adopt “techno-speak” and to gravitate towards bureaucratic solutions that are limiting and often lacking in creativity. The bureaucratization of feminist action also risks distorting the realities and complexities of women’s lives by categorizing—and thereby separating—women’s rights, although in real life these issues are intertwined, interdependent, and sometimes operate in competing ways. Cooptation of individual feminists and feminist issues is also a critical
issue. In the first case, feminists operating within neoliberal institutions recognize that compromises must be made if they are to succeed professionally, even if the ultimate objective is to use their power within these agencies to make more substantive and widespread change. In the second case, feminist movements have been co-opted and oftentimes de-politicized by politicians (e.g. Hillary Clinton using a feminist platform for election; the Korean government adopting a discourse of equality), or semi-conservative movements (e.g. the Million Men’s March, which stands for women’s rights even as it re-affirms women’s subordination). Feminist discourse is limited in other ways, in, for instance, the continued fear of words like “patriarchy” and “feminism.” Finally, power politics have marginalized many women—both within transnational institutions and in the larger society—and have exacerbated tensions between men and women and among women.

Despite the enormity of these obstacles, transnational feminist movements have been critical in challenging patriarchal and neoliberal discourses and practices and in creating alternative—and more just—ways of seeing and acting in the world. The work of the UN, although constrained, has helped push forward many important advances for women. The entrance of young queer women into the leadership of many progressive movements is another hopeful sign. Two young students from Mexico further noted that many men are allies to women’s issues. Men should not be excluded from feminist movements simply because of their gender; rather, they should be seen as potential allies in reversing gender oppression.

Speakers suggested several strategies for effecting change in the future. Several participants stressed the importance of connections and collaboration between grassroots organizing and transnational movements, which is integral for rooting our work in everyday places and spaces. Additionally, despite the many obstacles that national governments often present to feminist causes, there are times when partnering with state institutions can push forward a feminist agenda. These opportunities need to be identified and honed to our advantage. Feminists also need to acknowledge our own complicity in engaging bureaucratic/neoliberal discourses and work to transform our language in order to accommodate the complexity of women’s lives and to create space for creative and alternative ways of transforming unequal gendered structures. Finally, women in Africa, Iran, Korea, China, Mexico, and many other developing countries need to be given access to resources and tools for mobilization. As one woman from Darfur noted, women are not only victims, but stakeholders in the everyday decisions that shape their lives. We need to continue to find ways to empower marginalized women, to hold policymakers accountable, and to remain conscious of the contradictions that shape and threaten feminist action in a neoliberal world.

*The Oxford Handbook of Transnational Feminist Movements* (OUP 2015) is edited by Rawwida Baksh and Wendy Harcourt, with contributions by the editors and prominent feminist scholars and practitioners from across the globe, including Valentine M. Moghadam, International Affairs Director and Professor.