THE MESSY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FEMINISMS AND GLOBALIZATIONS

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With some exceptions, feminist scholars have written either about gender and globalizations or about transnational feminisms but rarely examined the relationship between them. In this essay, the author wants to reflect on this relationship to highlight how they have shaped each other. She suggests that feminisms are important force-shaping globalizations. At the same time, the relationship between them is fraught and in some instances has furthered inequalities among feminists. But this does not preclude other possibilities as is evident in the work of feminists around the world.

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For the past decade, I have been engaged both with transnational feminisms and with writing about gender and globalizations.[1] In the course of my engagement in these two fields, I have been intrigued by the interrelationship(s) between them. Yet with some exceptions (e.g., Eisenstein 2005), feminist scholars have written about gender and globalizations or about transnational feminisms but have rarely examined the connections between the two. In this essay, I reflect on this relationship to highlight how they have shaped each other. I suggest that feminisms are important forces shaping globalizations. At the same time the interrelationships are fraught and in some instances have furthered inequalities among women. But this does not preclude other possibilities, as is evident in the work of feminists around the world.

To begin with the issue of how the two have shaped each other, I draw on Hester Eisenstein's (2005) important, but not widely discussed, article: "A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization." In it she argues that in the United States, global capitalism has used feminists' arguments for women's autonomy and need for economic independence to undermine welfare and the family wage and to send poor women into

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the workforce. Concurrently in the Third World similar feminist ideologies have been used to feminize the workforce in the export processing zones and to discipline poor women, through micro-credit, into becoming responsible economic agents.[2] Thus, like missionaries in the nineteenth century, feminisms in the twentieth act as "cultural solvent[s], as globalization erodes the traditions of patriarchy" (Eisenstein 2005, 487). Such a "legitimization of feminism masks the radical restructuring of the world economy, and the glitter of economic liberation disguises the intensification of poverty for the vast majority of women" (Eisenstein 2005, 489–90). Eisenstein argues, then, that feminism has served unwittingly as the handmaiden of corporate globalization.

While I agree with Eisenstein that actors of corporate globalization have used feminist ideologies for their own profit, this is only a partial account. The other story is how feminists have used globalizations to further women's agency and their political, economic, and cultural empowerment. To see these other stories, one needs to define globalizations in the plural and to understand feminists as both constitutive of, and important actors in, globalizations (Desai forthcoming-b).

Here I will give a few examples of the ways in which feminists have shaped the spaces of global politics: by providing theoretical frameworks, organizational structures, and strategies; engaging economic globalizations to exploit both the opportunities provided by it; articulating alternatives to corporate globalization; and creating new cultures of globalization (Desai forthcoming-b).

The International Women's Decade, 1975–85, brought together women's organizations from around the world. The feminist principles women from these organizations had developed across their respective local contexts facilitated the formation of a new transnational perspective for political action, new organizational structures, and new strategies. Primary among these was the commitment to an intersectional analysis and transversal politics. The contentious experiences of dealing with differences among women for those in women's movements in the North and South enabled the transnational women's gatherings to form solidarities across differences.

In addition to this transnational political perspective, transnational feminists were among the first to develop networks, on the basis of nonhierarchical, informal structures and participatory processes, to share experiences and strategize for political actions at multiple levels. These networks were formed before information and communication technologies made such connections the norm in corporate and civil society. Finally, transnational feminists also pioneered strategies for articulating

autonomous spaces—such as tribunals, caucuses, grassroots women's networks, partnerships with other movements and local authorities—exemplified in projects like the Feminist Dialogues. These strategies mobilize both a critique and an alternative to global politics today, especially those practiced in conjunction with the World Social Forum. Hence, contemporary global politics have to be recognized as feminist politics.

Even in the realm of economic globalization, feminists have made important contributions. From highlighting the ways global corporations have used gendered and racialized assumptions to feminize the labor force to demonstrating how processes of economic globalizations are gendered, feminists have been at the forefront of challenging corporate globalizations. For example, feminists have demanded an end to what Acker (2006) calls corporate irresponsibility; they have proposed a "Maria tax" to acknowledge the reproductive labor of women; they have called for nongendered caring and provisioning as the basis of production and reproduction instead of profits (e.g., Beneria 2003); and they have crafted egalitarian institutions, organizations, families, and communities.

In addition to the feminist focus on waged work in corporate globalizations, in my own research I have shown how women cross-border traders[3] creatively use the openings provided by global trade to make better lives for themselves (Desai forthcoming-b). Most women cross-border traders are able to build new houses, provide education for their children as public education becomes scarce, and expand their business. Cross-border trade has also enabled women to become independent and to develop local and regional networks and economies based on creative responses to the uncertainties created by the structural adjustment programs in the region.

Cross-border trading is not restricted to poor women. In many West African countries middle- and upper-class women also engage in cross-border trade and bring in foreign consumer items for men and women in local markets. In Southern Africa cross-border trade was made possible by the new immigration policies of the postapartheid regime, which enabled other Africans to travel freely to South Africa, as well as by the structural adjustment programs that created the need for women to become traders. Women have engaged in this trade out of necessity as well as innovation. In the process, they have developed social networks and new collective identities that have empowered them as individuals and as members of communities.

In the cultural globalization realm, I have suggested that we move away from the homogenizing, hybridity, and clash of civilizations debates (e.g., Nederveen Pieterse 2004). Instead, I argue that we should focus on the nonconsumptive, interactive culture of globalization in which women

weave their own traditions and practices along with other cultural and political traditions. In this sphere, women are using new technologies to create cultures of globalization that are both place and cyber based and that enable them to communicate with local, national, and transnational communities working for gender justice. These new cultures of globalization are invented and imagined based on traditions as well as modernities, combine new organizational structures with new forms of communication, circulate transnationally, and illuminate alternative cultural possibilities that blur the distinctions between the aesthetic and everyday sense of culture.

For example, in Guatemala, the Centro de Communicadoras is a Mayan site where Web surfers can sign up with women's cooperatives to learn how to make videos or access handicrafts produced by women's cooperatives in the rural areas. The sales are handled by women directly, thus facilitating social economies outside the capitalist system. In Mexico, Laneta (slang for truth), which began promoting the use of the Internet for the women's movement in 1993, links women's organizations and networks in rural and urban Mexico for sharing information and strategizing for collective action. In Bolivia, Chasquinet has provided indigenous women access to computer training by opening telecenters, or cyber cafés. Women have used this training for opening Internet-based businesses as well as to address issues of violence against women in their communities. These new cultures of globalization embody hybridities of virtual and geographic communities, and of activists across movements and classes. In using technology for social change, activists develop a common culture based on social justice.

Despite these examples of the ways in which feminists and feminisms have shaped globalizations, these are uneven relationships. Although feminisms, in some organized fashion, are alive and well in more parts of the world today than at any other time, the lives of most women around the world are mired in poverty, ill-health, and injustice. Feminists have offered many explanations for this contradictory state, such as the new inequalities resulting from neoliberal globalization, the war on terror, religious fundamentalisms, the difficulties of transforming structures and institutions, and the lack of political will to redistribute resources. I would add to that list some of the strategies of transnational feminisms (Desai 2007; Pearson 2003; Simon-Kumar 2004).

For example, transnational feminisms have for the most part drawn on the expertise of educated, privileged women from the global North and the South who are well versed in a Euro- and U.S.-centric professional culture. To function as an activist in the global women's rights movement, one

needs expertise—such as a familiarity with the UN system and its treaties and platforms, and the ability to raise funds for travel—that is for the most part available only among educated women from the North and the South. This is not to say that feminists have not made efforts to be more inclusive. But given the structural inequalities that exist, their efforts have been limited by the ability of women lacking formal education—and facility in English, in particular—to navigate global gatherings. This has led to inequalities among feminists who work in the global versus local arenas. Moreover, some of the spaces in which transnational feminists have operated, such as the UN, and even global meetings such as the World Social Forum, have ended up taking feminist insights and demands and transforming them into managerial solutions, such as gender mainstreaming, that have not really addressed structural inequalities. This has led some feminists to advocate a move away from global spaces, where the victories are primarily symbolic and discursive, to local arenas where addressing issues of immediate relevance on a local scale is more likely to yield concrete improvement in people's lives.

The move to local and more concrete issues does not have to entail moving away from transnational perspectives, networks, or solidarities. Such networks and solidarities provide both support and resources. Rather, strategic uses of transnational connections for local actions are more useful as many women's groups have found.

But while transnational feminist strategies have played a part in the contradictory situation of women's continuing poverty and ill-health in the face of the rise of feminist power around the globe, the major reasons continue to be the greater power of other actors—new and old, global and local—in marginalizing and harming women around the world. And to deal with such entrenched power inequalities, we need to enact a dual politics of possibilities—a pragmatic politics of what is possible within the current conjuncture and a visionary politics of what can be possible—even as we recognize the power and complicity of some of us.

Feminists around the world have already been engaged in such a dual politics of possibilities. For example, in India, where religious differences are often so volatile, activists have used gender equality, to which the Indian state is committed, to gain rights for women while sidestepping religious debates (Desai forthcoming-a). In fact, to some extent feminists have been doing this from the start. Since its inception, one of the strengths of feminisms has been their openness to self-critique and change. The plural, feminisms, in common usage now, is itself recognition of this regenerative process.

In conclusion, what the messy relationship between feminisms and globalizations suggests is the need to be aware of, and to critique, the complicity, unwitting though it may be, of some feminists and feminist ideologies with global capital. It also highlights the necessity of reinvigorating our alternative values of creating and living in societies where caring and provisioning are not gendered and racialized but rather are the framework that guides all of our actions. To achieve this, we need to remind ourselves of the dual politics of possibilities in our individual and collective lives.

NOTES

1. I define both as plural processes, the former reflecting the diversity of gendered realities around the world and the latter in terms of economic, political, and cultural processes. While both the multiple feminisms and globalizations are mutually constitutive, they are also distinct.

2. In addition to serving global capital through economic means, Eisenstein (2005) argues that the U.S. administration has used feminism for its imperial policies via the war on terror.

3. Cross-border traders are those who buy food and other consumer items in one country and sell it another. In some regions women take goods from their home country to another and return with goods from the foreign country to their own. Such cross-border trade by women has been facilitated by the economic globalization that has opened borders between countries that previously did not allow such easy flow of people and goods across-borders.

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