

“Where we stand in the struggle” - New Feminist Strategies in a Neo-liberal World



Illustration from Isis International-Manila

by Jessica Horn

The first protest against neo-liberal globalisation that I attended was the demonstration against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Seattle in 1999. I had gone with a group of young Southern feminists and feminists of colour from my university. We met a group of young activists of colour from the Bay Area in California, joined them in their preparations, and eventually marched with them. The experience taught me two important lessons.

The Bay Area activists knew that if the police began to attack, the racist US police force would, of course, target the activists of colour first, and probably target us with more violence. And if that happened, we would need to know what our rights were regarding arrest, and have the phone number of a lawyer ready. We grouped ourselves into pairs and kept track of each other in the demonstration to ensure that no one was hurt. When the state security began its violent onslaught with tanks, we found our way to safety while other protesters threw themselves at the police. In the end, none of us was seriously injured and no one was arrested.

And so I learned the first lesson—in resisting, you can never forget your identity in history—as a woman, as a person from the South, as a minority in the North. Who you are always determines how you experience

violation. Acknowledging this is the first step in finding appropriate tools for resistance and sustaining the struggle.

When the police began to fire rubber bullets at the protesters we were, of course, afraid, and decided to regroup and assess what to do next. We huddled together and one of the brothers asked, “Has anyone seen people being hit by a rubber bullet?” We all replied affirmatively. “Has anyone been hit by one?” One person raised a hand. He asked, “What did it feel like?” The person responded, “Well, it stung a bit, like being slapped.” “So it won’t seriously injure or kill you?” he asked. “No,” the person replied. “So then we have nothing to be scared of!” he responded.

then make a few suggestions for the way forward.

Recognising new constellations of power and resources

The concept paper on radical democracy prepared for the Feminist Dialogues cites the new and growing forms of power that are undermining our freedoms as women, and as citizens. It brings out, in particular, the fact that the business of transnational corporations and the aid from international banks and governments come with political baggage and often with “strings” that undermine the sovereignty and authority of the state in the global South.

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From that exchange, I learned the second lesson—you have to invest in understanding what you are opposing, so that you have an accurate sense of its weaknesses, its strengths, and the difference between its perceived and actual power.

With those two thoughts in mind, I would like to focus on some of the key trends which I feel are imperative to take note of and develop strategies around, and

While not ignoring this, I would like to draw attention to an additional trend which is posing a complicated challenge to us as feminists—that of the growth of private, philanthropic entrepreneurs. As individuals, they have no formal accountability to the public and fall even further below the radar of international law than corporations.

Take the most visible philanthropist of the twenty-first century, Bill Gates. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has an endowment fund of \$66 billion, an amount a recent Los Angeles Times’ article estimates to be greater than the gross domestic product (GDP) of 70% of the world’s nations. At present, the majority of this endowment is invested unethically in the lucrative oil industry, an industry intimately linked to militarism and environmental abuses, both of which women pay a heavy price for. The agenda of the Gates Foundation’s actual philanthropy also has a considerable- and potentially transformatory- leverage around global policy on health. And yet, Southern citizens have no platform to engage with

the program or investment policies of either the individual or his foundation.

Another example is the Sudanese mobile phone entrepreneur, Mo Ibrahim. Ibrahim is the owner of Celtel, the official mobile service provider for the Nairobi World Social Forum. His recently created The Mo Ibrahim Award

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for Achievement in African Leadership promotes “democracy” by awarding a multi-million dollar cash prize to an African leader that has demonstrated good governance on leaving office. The prize fundamentally undermines the idea that it is the duty of elected representatives to be fair and non-corrupt, and replaces accountability to the voting public with a cash incentive. His initiative has been lauded by the international political elite, despite the glaring slap in the face for the concept of democratic accountability.

My point here is not to criticise all forms of individual philanthropy. The role and effects of private philanthropy are far from uniform, and progressive philanthropy remains important in keeping feminist NGOs and human rights activism alive. Rather, we must acknowledge the fact that development financing is no longer a question of government to

government, bank to government, or even industry to government deals. We urgently need more feminist funding research to track the agendas of the large streams of private money being invested in the South, and identify ways to intervene to make this financing more accountable to needs and rights as articulated by affected communities. Again, a nuanced understanding of the new constellations of power we face is vital for turning them in our favour.

A second trend to track is the rapid growth of Southern economies and the implications this will have for economic and social policy decisions in the next fifty years. India, China, South Africa and Brazil are all gaining a stronger foothold in global markets, and as a consequence, in global politics and decision-making. While there may well be progressive civil societies in these countries, including active feminist movements, this does not necessarily translate into progressive government policies at the national level or in the international domain, particularly with regard to women’s rights. (The Brazilian government under Lula has demonstrated progressive leadership on HIV/AIDS and anti-homophobia internationally, although this is always vulnerable to political trade-offs when it has the potential to impact negatively on trade.) Given this, I would argue that we need a more variegated analysis of “South” and “North.” I return to my opening lesson of acknowledging who we are in history as a beginning point for effective activism. The world for my generation cannot be so easily split into binary political geographies or solely into a struggle of “us versus them.”

Moving forward

One of the African sisters, Stella Mukasa, made a call for us to start being more concrete in our suggestions, and to move

from “opposing” to “proposing.” Reflecting on the notion of radical democracy, what would a feminist constitution look like? How would it enable young women’s participation and voice?

How do we use our collective power base to push the feminist agenda forward? For while we do spend a considerable amount of time identifying and assessing our vulnerabilities, we also have a strong power base—the power of our numbers as half the world’s population, our collective intellectual power as feminists, our power as voters and as consumers—and use this as the basis for catalyzing change and holding our abusers to account.

Whatever happened to the concept of self-determination? It is a concept that I learned in the teachings of Gandhi and Nyerere, among others, thinking about the predicament of dependency in the global economy. It is a concept that I rarely hear debated in Southern feminist forums or in the discourse of my fellow young feminists. If we do not want to be reliant on the products of a highly inequitable global market economy, how do we generate alternatives? How active are we in the research and practice of alternative agriculture and energy, for example?

Turning the focus to this forum, we have had such trouble communicating with each other across language

barriers. Perhaps one activist investment we can make as feminists working transnationally is to develop our language skills. There are now training institutes for young feminists; how about creating a feminist language institute? Individuals may commit to begin to learn the major international languages—French, Spanish, English, Arabic—and could then attend a month-long intensive language training, taught by feminists, where they can develop their ability to speak, read, and write and also learn feminist terminology in these new languages. We know that while our interpreters do a great job, they are often not exposed to feminist terminology, hence, they can translate our presentations incorrectly. What about collectively developing a feminist lexicon for our interpreters and translators to use?

To end, Nelson Mandela has been criticised in some quarters for upholding idealistic principles of justice and equity. To this, he responds that his moral compass is not guided by idealism but democratic realism.

This process of the Feminist Dialogues and the project of (re)defining the parameters of justice and democracy are critical for us as young women. We have inherited a world of increasing inequity and injustice, but I am inspired by the faith that another world—a feminist world—is possible. Let us invest in developing our visions and strategies of feminist democratic realism! ■



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