



Chapter 10

Women mobilizing to reshape democracy

Women's activism in civil society is the main force behind women-friendly legislative change, and underpins the efforts of feminists in public office. A strong and autonomous women's movement can greatly magnify the influence of a women's caucus, providing "an external base of support and legitimacy to counterbalance internal government resistance to the enactment and implementation of feminist policies".¹ Politicians committed to gender equality need to take their cue from domestic women's movements. Their work would be much simpler if women's movements were united around a common agenda, or if political parties had greater incentives to respond to women's needs. Instead, gender concerns compete with many other priorities for women around the world, and may be subsumed by the requirement that they adhere to national or cultural codes whose versions of gender relations are decidedly inequitable.

Women are regarded as having low political efficacy because of their poor endowment in resources such as the time and money needed to create social and political influence, and because their interests diverge according to all manner of social cleavages.² Yet women are well mobilized in civil society associations and social movements almost everywhere. The globalization of communications has created new opportunities, enabling women to experiment with new means for bringing key players—governments, corporations and international organizations—to account. Global summits and conferences on a wide range of topics including trade, health and human rights have enabled women to network across countries and regions, and have conferred legitimacy on their own national and international movements as key participants in global policy debates.

Before the role of women's movements in political life is examined, the character of these associations needs to be understood. A useful general definition is that they can be "understood as female collective action in pursuit of social and political goals".³ The collective action may take a distinct associational form, or may simply comprise a diffuse coalition of like-minded organizations and informal groups taking part in demonstrations. This definition does not insist that women's movements necessarily have as their core purpose the rebalancing of gender power relations, or that they define themselves as feminist; they simply have to be led by, and to mobilize, women. The dominance of women indicates that they are grounded in claims of gendered identity: women have mobilized explicitly as women and because they are women, thereby asserting a female gendered identity distinct from other possible identities.⁴

WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND FEMINIST POLITICS

Women's movements are not necessarily feminist. Feminist politics specifically object to patriarchy and seek to eliminate the subordination and discrimination stemming from male dominance.⁵ Feminist groups within women's movements may therefore seek to challenge the conventional gender roles that may have been the basis for organizing in the first place.⁶ The two types of movement should not be conflated; it cannot be assumed that female collective action is necessarily devoted to advancing women's rights and seeking gender justice. Indeed,

certain forms of right-wing or conservative faith-based women's activism seek to do the opposite.

A significant amount of female mobilization and solidarity occurs outside women-dominated organizations. Trade unions, political parties, state-sponsored mass organizations, and civil-society groups with other agendas may advocate on behalf of their women members. These other forms of female mobilization constitute a large part, possibly the greater part, of female solidarity in the world.⁷ Where female mobilization is not autonomous or independent, it may take the form of “associational linkages” with other social movements. This results in many parts of the world in strategic alliances between women's groups and other, sometimes more powerful, civil-society organizations whose principal agenda is in such fields as the environment, peace, trade liberalization, globalization and human rights.⁸

Alternatively, female mobilization may take the form of “directed mobilization”; here, it is under the control of another institutional authority, typically governments or political parties. Female mobilization directed by authorities in the name of collective, national or religious interests may not only exclude women's emancipation as a central goal; it may actually work to abrogate rights women have already gained, as in the case of some faith-based movements.⁹ Women's participation in this form of collective action has been actively sought by conservative leaders to demonstrate the popular legitimacy of proposals to strengthen patriarchal interpretations of women's rights. A striking example was the participation of women in the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979.

WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT IN DEMOCRATIZATION

What has been described as the “third wave” of democratization¹⁰ peaked in 1989–90 with the collapse of state socialism in the old Eastern bloc and their transition to open economies. In the remaining authoritarian states, there has continued to be movement towards democracy during the last 15 years, as well as the establishment of new democracies following

conflicts in the Balkans, and in Africa. Around the world, a number of countries are undergoing an extended process of democratic consolidation, in which legal systems are being amended to incorporate new constitutional rights, and political systems are being tested for their capacity to tolerate opposition. In Latin America, where the wave of revolutionary struggle and political liberalization peaked earlier than elsewhere, women have gone furthest in seeking constitutional and legislative changes which recognize their equality, followed by policy confirmation of these gains.

Women have played a central role in many democratization struggles, a role recognized as essential to their success, especially where conventional channels for political opposition have been closed. Where parties and trade unions have been banned, as in Chile under President Augusto Pinochet, or where the male leadership of national liberation movements was in exile or jail, as in South Africa, women's grassroots mobilization provided an arena in which oppositional politics could be sustained. This contribution to democratization has not always provided a springboard for women's subsequent engagement in politics. In Chile, for instance, during the slum-based protests of the late 1980s, decentralized organizations and diffuse leadership structures protected women activists, but did not generate women politicians able to gain leadership positions in the new democratic parties.

Patterns can be detected for women's involvement in the democratization process, some of which are echoed in different settings from around the world; others are regionally specific. In some cases where there has been protracted social discontent and a resistance movement, women have not only been active in the upheaval stage, but their representatives have been able to participate in negotiations over new constitutions. The contribution of the Women's National Coalition in South Africa to the constitution-writing process in the mid-1990s is the clearest case of a women's movement capitalizing on its previous role to assert its interests in the new environment. A similar process occurred in Namibia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, East Timor, the Philippines and Mozambique.

Backlash: The Eastern European experience

Where authoritarian states such as those in the ex-USSR and Eastern Europe based part of their legitimacy on their inclusive attitude towards women in the workplace and public life, subsequent democratization has brought a backlash against women's political participation. In Eastern Europe the role in public affairs previously assigned to women by repressive communist regimes encouraged women to downplay feminist interests; instead they sought to emphasize their role in the domestic sphere of family life as the guardians of privacy and family integrity. Dissident movements of the 1980s protested against invasive social engineering, and have been described as having an ideology of "anti-politics".¹¹ Women were not represented in the leadership of these movements; only 20 per cent of the signatories to Charter 77 were women, and although half of the members of Polish Solidarity were women, few held leadership positions.¹²

The demise of state socialism and the transition to democracy brought a collapse in the numbers of women in public office and stagnation in their involvement in civil-society activity. Feminist groups are today described as very weak in many Eastern European countries,¹³ and even where there are a number of active feminist groups, as in Poland, these have been described as "more a curiosity than a real political force".¹⁴ Some women's organizations align themselves with conservative ideologies, idealizing women in motherhood and domestic roles and actively opposing abortion and reproductive rights. The Hungarian Christian Democratic Party, with the strongest appeal to women voters and the highest proportion of women members, celebrates women's moral superiority and their responsibilities in a traditional Catholic household.

Paradoxes: North Africa and the Middle East

In some North African and Middle Eastern states, democratization has produced similar paradoxes. Where military,

one-party or monarchical regimes suppressed Islamic associations—as in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco—they often substituted social development programmes for democracy as a source of their legitimacy, and took steps to enhance women's status.¹⁵ The promotion of women's rights thus became linked to unpopular governments. Rapid top-down processes of political liberalization have been incomplete, and have seen few incumbents of the previous regimes unseated. The manifest bad faith demonstrated by the restrictions on effective political competition have discredited the political reform process.

In many of these countries, the only movements articulating coherent and credible opposition to the regime may be Islamic groups whose critique is grounded in antipathy to western democracy and consumer capitalism. The dilemma for women's movements is profound. In the ongoing conflicts in Israel/Palestine and Iraq, the legitimacy of secular governments has been eroded, and the Islamic critique made all the more credible to women. Women's movements do not have the social and political resources to contest powerful Islamist groups, and instead engage strategically with them. For many, this has meant working from within the Islamist camp, seeking to revise religious interpretations of women's roles in order to expand the space for women's political expression.¹⁶

Imposed democratization: Sub-Saharan Africa

In several sub-Saharan African countries, the political liberalization process set in motion in the context of structural adjustment and as a condition for external loans has been half-hearted; women's participation has been limited. Ruling parties accustomed to unchallenged power, as in Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Zambia, Tanzania, Burundi and Malawi, have tried to control democratization and contain the emergence of effective opposition. Traditional "big man" politics has had a tendency to limit women's political engagement to activities that were marginal and uncritically supportive of the national leader; when the political process opened up in the 1990s, women's movements were in weak positions to take part.

In 1995, for instance, the ruling party in Tanzania announced the resumption of multi-party politics and took the nation to the polls for the first time in 30 years. There was no opportunity to take stock of the past and renegotiate the rules of democratic politics. In Malawi, civil society was given only a few months to change the constitution in early 1994; in Zambia social upheaval and violent unrest in the mid-1990s provoked a hastily called multi-party election in 1996, with no opportunity for constitutional and institutional change. In post-civil-war Uganda, in contrast, a protracted transition enabled women to make a substantial contribution to constitutional debate, although this has taken place within constitutionally entrenched one-party rule.

As in North Africa, the slow rate of democratic consolidation in most sub-Saharan African states is shown by the absence of any significant change in governmental composition or leadership, although the encouraging exceptions of Ghana, Benin, Senegal and Kenya stand out. In some countries, opposition parties remain weak, and executives excessively powerful. This poses serious problems for women's movements, as they rely upon state support for gender-sensitive policy development. A familiar cycle is reappearing: executives legitimize themselves in part through their patronage of the women's movement, and this works to the discredit of the cause of gender equality. In yet other countries such as Angola, Burundi, Congo, Somalia, Sudan and Liberia, democratization remains a distant prospect as civil society tries to contain, or recover from, terror and war. Zimbabwe is an example of a country where the democratic process has lost ground in the face of violent state repression. In the run-up to the 2000 elections, women's political mobilization across the political spectrum was held in check by widespread intimidation.

Women's drive for constitutional change

Constitutional change has been a central focus of women's recent participation in democratization. The 1990s saw women's organizations around the world exposing the limits of basic

civil and political rights that exclude the "private" sphere of marriage and family life from democratic scrutiny. Constitutional review has enabled women politicians to identify serious gaps in women's basic citizenship rights, and to address the problem of gender-biased customary/religious law in the jurisdiction of family matters. They have also set in place provisions designed to make women's access to public office easier in future, such as quotas or reservations in national and subnational governments.¹⁷

The importance of taking a strong position on women's rights within constitutional review processes has galvanized women's movements to unify, even if only temporarily, around constitutional change processes. In Uganda, women's participation in the Constituent Assembly created the basis for effective caucusing there and in the first National Assembly to which many were elected. Participation has sharpened the strategic abilities of women politicians, and broadened the political understanding and skills of women's groups that have tried to support and lobby women in office. Constitutional engagement represents a new front in the struggle for public accountability for gender equality: by insisting on participating in framing the rules of membership in the national community, and the rules on access to and exercise of power, women are suggesting that they will not be bound by political systems in which they have had no voice or representation.

Mobilizing for electoral gain: The 50/50 struggle

In the post-transition period, many countries have seen a demobilization of the women's movement. In Latin America and South Africa in particular, some prominent feminist pro-democracy activists have been absorbed into government. In many settings, the unity provoked by opposition to authoritarianism has dissolved and long-standing differences re-emerged. But however profoundly divergent women's positions are on many issues, there has been one patch of common ground on which the majority converge: the demand for gender parity in public office. Since the late 1990s, civil society campaigns for

equal representation with men have gathered momentum, aided by the international “50/50” campaign of the Women’s Environment and Development Organization. Women on all points of the political compass can agree to protest at the low numbers of women in politics and the poor take-up of their concerns by political parties.

The presence of growing numbers of women in office acts as a catalyst for a push to increase these numbers still further. For example, the growth in numbers of Ugandan women in politics has spurred a “new kind of political self-organization for Ugandan women”:¹⁸ gaining access to politics has become a common interest among diverse women’s groups. In Namibia, an ethnically diverse and hitherto divided women’s movement has come together around the same purpose: electing women to office. Launched in 1999, the Namibian Women’s Manifesto Network, a coalition of groups backing a women’s election manifesto, had as one of its main aims the achievement of a 50 per cent quota for women on lists of party candidates; these lists were to be structured “zebra” fashion with alternating women and men. This 50/50 campaign provoked country-wide mobilization to an extent unprecedented in Namibia, to the point that “politics is becoming the central point around which a new feminist consensus is emerging [in Africa]”, and where “the pragmatics of women’s political representation in the 1990s are shaping the emerging African women’s movement”.¹⁹

Latin America has seen a similar development. Since the 1990s the goal of increasing women’s representation in formal political bodies has become a unifying theme of women’s groups in the region. Many countries have passed laws mandating female quotas on party lists, and many parties still attempt to evade these requirements. In the circumstances, monitoring party compliance has become a shared concern of women’s groups across the political spectrum: women in conservative parties are as interested in political seats as left-wingers.

However, proposals for affirmative action measures do not always unify women. In India, a constitutional amendment to reserve 33 per cent of seats in parliament for women has been stalled since 1996. Although the amendment is supported by many women’s associations, this has not been a unifying issue

for women in the political climate of today. The reasons for this cut to the heart of Indian politics. The recent expansion of democracy in India has included the emergence of many small ethnic and caste-based parties at state level, whose role in the successful formation of coalitions at the centre is often decisive.²⁰ The rise of these parties reflects decades of affirmative action to support socially disadvantaged tribes and castes, through reserved places in schools, universities and public-sector jobs. Some of these parties oppose the 33 per cent women amendment on the grounds that it is a means of reasserting upper-caste dominance of national political institutions—which has been significantly eroded. The reservation bill does not make provisions for “quotas within quotas”, to make sure that the women who reach parliament are not the educated, wealthy and upper-caste women most likely to have the connections and resources needed to run for office.²¹

WOMEN’S REACTION TO FAITH-BASED AND ETHNIC MOVEMENTS

While in many countries political liberalization has enabled secular women’s movements to flourish, in some countries democratization has stalled or become mired in economic or political crisis. When the state in its modern and secular guise fails to deliver physical security or service improvement, its image sours. In some countries, the discrediting of modernity as a solution to social ills has stimulated the growth of conservative ethnic and religious movements, often in spite of official repression. Gender relations are matters of central importance to many of these groups, particularly where “women’s liberation” is associated with failed or repressive modernization.

In a growing number of countries these groups have become important political actors, especially where they are effective at mobilizing socially marginal populations. Islamic groups in North African and Middle Eastern countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan; in South and Southeast Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia; and in West African countries such as Senegal and Nigeria, may not

win large numbers of seats in parliament. However, they have tremendous political leverage as brokers and kingmakers in ruling coalitions. In other countries such as the Philippines or Algeria, they remain banned but have an increasing capacity to disrupt. Both conservative and radical Christian groups around the world have also experienced a surge, for example as social animators of grassroots self-help activities in Latin America and Africa. The institutional church also retains its impact on high-level politics in many Latin American and African countries and in the Philippines. In India, Hindu chauvinist cultural and religious movements have polarized the electorate on Hindu–Muslim lines and contributed to the electoral success of the parties with which they are associated.

There is no evidence that women are more attracted than are men to conservative faith-based or culturally extremist groups, but there is evidence from around the world that these groups are gaining in strength. Women form an unspecified but visible component, both in membership and leadership. Women's deportment, mobility, dress and roles within the family are often central to the cultural revival or pious society envisaged by these groups; women's behaviour is upheld as a marker of authenticity and moral integrity. When constituted as political parties, conservative religious associations have not given women access to institutional power either within the party or in public office. But as social movements they have encouraged women to engage in public activism, and even to become militant in ways that violate traditional gender roles; for example, in inciting violence as did Hindu nationalist women in the anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat in 2002. At the same time, these women articulate cultural and social agendas that propose the restriction of women's rights. This simultaneous capacity of ethnic or religious groups to mobilize women while undermining their advancement is a matter of great concern to feminists. In particular, the growth of political Islam has made many feminists in Muslim societies reconsider the usefulness of a secular approach that can alienate women for whom religion is central, who may well constitute a majority.

Women in illiberal mobilization

There are many explanations for the appeal of conservative or extremist religious movements to women. A religious congregation can provide a socially acceptable arena in which women can express their concerns. Many faith or church-based movements provide a range of services that women need, and even support their gender-specific needs in a more credible and practical way than do progressive, but unimplemented, secular constitutional provisions. They appear to offer arenas of social approval, sexual safety, normative certainty and political agency, that have the advantage of inciting less resistance from husbands than does women's feminist activism.

In conservative societies, women may find social leadership roles available to them through religious movements, particularly when there are few respectable means of taking up politically prominent roles in environments where women moving about in society on their own can expect to face sexual harassment. In India, the *Rashtra Sevika Sangh*, which is the women's branch of the militant Hindu cultural association the *Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh*, even provides younger women with a means of postponing marriage while they make their contribution to the cause of Hindu nationalism through physical activity, social work, and training in the use of rifles and *lathis* (wooden batons). The *Jamaat-e-Islami* in Bangladesh and Pakistan gives its women recruits a distinctive *burqa* to identify them as *Jamaat* members to be defended by party activists from attack; this enhances their mobility.

Faith-based movements also have extensive resources and can provide social services where the state has failed. Islamic groups run *madrassas*—Koranic schools—for children in Bangladesh, Pakistan and other Muslim countries. Christian churches organize soup kitchens, schools and basic health services in low-income neighbourhoods in Latin American countries. Charity can be the only means of succour for women who fall out of the safety net of families and communities in societies with few state-provided services. In Bangladesh, when wives are arbitrarily divorced by husbands, have no property and no means of securing maintenance, the rural women's groups of the *Jamaat* may be the only source of shelter and

financial support. Religious groups can also offer vigilante services where state security systems have failed.

Central to the appeal of contemporary religious movements is their critique of the state, society and the cultural invasion associated with globalization, coupled with the concrete rights that they advance for women. Across Latin America the Catholic Church has re-evaluated its alliances and sought to support the struggles of the poor against traditional elites. In Brazil, Chile and El Salvador, the protests of the church against human rights abuses have brought it into conflict with military regimes; in Brazil, its protests brought feminists into direct alliance with the Church on some matters. Islamist, Hindu and Christian movements articulate critiques of official corruption and of invasive Western cultural decadence, and lay claim to a moral high ground. The authentic cultures they wish to propose promote complementary social roles for women and men; this can be attractive in contexts where economic change has eroded men's breadwinning capacity, and women are stretching their time and energies between poorly paid employment and domestic work.

At the same time as offering an attractive critique of political regimes and of neoliberal economic policy, religious movements appear able to combine conservative views on gender relations with prominent roles for women leaders. Some even provide support for areas of women's empowerment and rights. One of the most striking features of Hindu nationalism in India is the fact that the movement's most successful orators are women, some unmarried, who do not conform to conservative prescriptions for women's behaviour. Two of these, Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambara, were instrumental in goading mobs to destroy the mosque at Ayodhya in December 1992. Their anti-Muslim recordings inciting people to violence were so virulent they were banned by government. Exceptionally militant women leaders like these live and work with great independence; yet they advocate women's subjugation to domesticity and subordination to their husbands.²² Nevertheless, the interests of the religious or nationalist programme outweigh in importance the fulfilment of traditional expectations to the extent that they inveigle women to abandon female modesty, engage in militancy and even take on suicide missions.

Socially progressive positions

Many religious groups have strong positions against violence against women, and against polygamy. They may also support women's inheritance rights, or oppose women's commercial sexual exploitation. Because women's social position and moral behaviour is of more importance to faith-based movements than to secular parties, some of them make great efforts to involve women and address their needs. Pentecostal groups in working-class areas of Brazil have put a particular emphasis on helping women tackle domestic violence.²³ In Bangladesh, where urban and rural women's mobilization around livelihood issues and women's rights is significant, the Jamaat-e-Islami clearly regards women's support as important to its electoral prospects and social legitimacy. Its 1996 election manifesto promised to increase women's (segregated) employment, end dowry payments, stop violence against women, and support their inheritance rights, using Islamic precepts on human equality to construct a socially progressive image.

In some countries women have sought to take charge of this faith-based agenda by attempting to define a feminist Islamist position and challenging the clerics' monopoly over the interpretation of Shari'a law. These efforts also represent a drive to establish greater consistency in interpreting women's rights; in many nominally secular countries—Egypt, Algeria and Jordan—religious law is used in a haphazard and inconsistent way to override women's constitutionally sanctioned rights. Similarly in Iran, where a dogmatic interpretation of Islam is used by an authoritarian theocratic state to restrict women's rights, there are few contexts where feminists can legitimately engage other than working within the Shari'a, offering new interpretations to justify an expansion of women's rights.²⁴

The work of feminist Islamist theologians has shown that the Shari'a is capable of accommodating many of women's needs in matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance. Feminist Islam has had an important cultural impact, expanding women's knowledge of their rights in Shari'a law. However, the entire enterprise would not have advanced so far were it not for the fact that the Islamic Republic of Iran has provided a model of a contemporary theocratic state to which Islamists can aspire.

Contemporary Islamist feminism is also a reaction against the cultural stereotyping of Islam.²⁵ Thus the feasibility of Islamist control of the state, and contemporary vilification of the Muslim faith and its adherents, have made feminist Islam a credible option for women active in Muslim societies.

Secular feminists increasingly engage with women in faith-based groups, recognizing that they do have an interest in political openness, and that they do have space to challenge gendered inequality. In Malaysia, for example, Muslim women representing welfare-based Islamic bodies joined the Women's Agenda for Change (WAC), a group formed after the debacle of Prime Minister Mahatir Mohamad's persecution of his Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. The 80 non-governmental organization (NGO)-strong WAC is essentially a lobby for democratic reform in an authoritarian neoliberal state. Malaysian feminists are highly critical of the state's repressive practices but have few practicable arenas for political activism. Islamic parties offer an alternative to the government's repressive modernism. Both government and Islamic opposition see the value of appealing to women, and have begun to compete for their participation and allegiance. In 2001 the government set up a Ministry of Women's Affairs, co-opted women activists from the WAC wherever possible, and has since derided the Islamic opposition for avoiding debates on gender equality. In the run-up to the 2004 election, the Islamic opposition retaliated by claiming feminist ground, announcing it would field a woman candidate in every state.

TRANSNATIONAL WOMEN'S MOBILIZATION

Transnational female mobilization has helped lay the foundations of global civil society over the past century. Its notable achievements include opposition to war, articulating an international treaty on women's rights, and the politicization of violence against women.²⁶ The last 10 years have seen an unprecedented growth in transnational women's and feminist activism. The many UN conferences and summits of the 1990s, and the rounds of international negotiations on trade, environmental

regulation, crimes against humanity and a number of other issues important to women, galvanized a search for alliances and enabled women's movements to become increasingly sophisticated in their engagement with global institutions. The spread of Internet-based communication has helped women overcome in-built disadvantages relating to mobility and voice. The communications power and institutional strength recently shown by global civil society can boost the campaigning effect, making the kind of impact on national and international policy that domestic women's movements rarely achieve on their own.

There is, of course, no one unified international women's movement, nor is there any such thing as global feminism. Profound disparities of all kinds exist between women's associations in different regions and countries. Nevertheless, alliance building among them has made a powerful impact on global norm setting and policy making in such contexts as reproductive rights,²⁷ violence against women, and international criminal law. Women campaigning for economic justice have been closely associated with the loose-knit Global Justice and Solidarity Movement, which focuses on the negative implications of free trade and globalization for developing world populations, and whose base since 2001 has been the annual World Social Fora.²⁸ Women's peace groups were centrally involved in the largest one-day protest in history: the 15 February 2003 anti-war demonstrations in 800 cities involving 11 million people. The Women's Caucus for Gender Justice made an important contribution to the drafting and adoption of the International Criminal Court (ICC) Statute in Rome in 2000, and helped assure the appointment of seven women judges (out of 18) to the ICC in March 2003.

The effectiveness of transnational women's mobilization is limited by certain factors. Similar problems face all international civil society lobbies trying to influence those who make and implement national and subnational policies by demanding adherence to international norms and treaties. Transnational women's campaigns have targeted UN organizations and the international financial institutions (IFIs), joining in demands for greater willingness on their behalf to address the expressions of policy-making concern coming from civil society through representative NGOs. They have also used the

occasions of their conferences and meetings as a staging arena for joint activism and an opportunity to develop cross-national positions. However, international treaties and resolutions do not necessarily lead to national enforcement, especially in states that are deeply conservative and opposed to a feminist agenda. Resolutions at international conferences are not binding, and rarely address deep structural problems in society. If changes are to take place at the national level, action is needed by women inside and outside government to hold states to account for their international commitments.²⁹

A further problem arises from ambiguities of working at both national and international levels. The goal of much feminist and women's engagement with global institutions is to improve the accountability of individual states to female citizens. For instance, some recent "anti-globalization" activism has sought to strengthen the independent policy-making capacities of individual states in relation to bodies such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). Should the women's network look to the same international bodies as potential advocates and enforcers of their agenda as are currently decried as the key perpetrators of programmes that reinforce social injustice in low-income countries? If women join in efforts to undermine these institutions' importance, they may have even less hope of influencing national agendas in favour of women's equal opportunities, or of galvanizing support for domestic women's movements in anti-feminist states. Recently, US unilateralism has prompted transnational women's groups to push for the strengthening of multilateral institutions, without which their own endeavours would not have flourished.

Transnational women's activism is also in tension with itself, given the vast range of difference among and between movements in different parts of the world. The definition of problems, their prioritization, goals and targets, and strategies for reaching them may all be differently perceived. Some divisions are along classic divides such as North–South; others are grounded in ideological or religious dogma, and have no particular geographical association; yet others are culturally specific. The alliances into which transnational women's movements enter also inevitably involve a lack of coincidence between agendas of different groups. For example, a useful ally

in the international campaign to cancel debt (Jubilee 2000) has been the Catholic Church, whose current hierarchy is vehemently opposed to gender justice.³⁰ The umbrellas provided by rights regimes and other sets of international norms and treaty obligations by no means invariably succeed in bringing all viewpoints together.

Human rights as a unifying framework

The concept of human rights appeals to a common humanity and human equality, universal standards of justice and fairness, liberal concepts of the individual and the community, and a responsive democratic state. Although its application across different cultures can be controversial, the human rights framework has nonetheless provided an umbrella under which diverse women's movements have worked together for the last 15 years. The specific articulation of women's human rights has also helped to centre gender equality and women's rights in other global policy fields, including social development, humanitarian law, population and environmental protection.

The principal international women's rights instrument is the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Due to increased mobilization by women's movements, ratification speeded up over the 1990s and many countries that had earlier registered reservations withdrew them.³¹ The legitimacy of women's organizations as credible monitors of CEDAW compliance was recognized in its 1999 Optional Protocol, which empowers the CEDAW Committee (a body of 23 independent experts charged with monitoring CEDAW performance at national level) to consider complaints brought directly by individual women or groups. Seventy-five countries have signed the Optional Protocol, but it remains to be fully ratified by many; it is also still too early to see whether it will improve states' compliance. Women who have exhausted their options under national law, or who have found that "the application of such remedies is unreasonably prolonged or unlikely to bring effective relief", can now directly seek redress under the terms of the Optional Protocol. The protocol is a recognition that state

reporting systems can suffer from the institutionalized male bias that normally inhibits reporting of women's rights abuses, and there should be a mechanism whereby women can bypass them.³²

The International Criminal Court

The experience of mobilization around CEDAW and its enforcement mechanisms led to the creation of a special women's campaigning body in connection with the establishment of the ICC. The Women's Caucus for Gender Justice, set up in 1997, grew out of the non-governmental Coalition for an ICC formed in 1995, and drew on the strength and sophistication gained in earlier international activity. The Caucus lobbied for the appointment of women and gender experts throughout all the organs of the Court, and for its independence from traditional power structures.³³ The group also demanded better protection for victims of crimes, prompting the adoption of Article 15 of the Statute of the ICC. This empowers the ICC prosecutor to investigate allegations of crimes not only upon referral from the Security Council or individual states, but also on information from victims, non-governmental organizations and "any other reliable source".³⁴

The Women's Caucus also demanded the inclusion of sexual violence as a crime against humanity (and a war crime). Thus all states that acknowledge ICC jurisdiction have a duty to co-operate with the ICC in the investigation and prosecution of these crimes, no matter where they are committed or by whom: sovereignty cannot be claimed as cover for domestic atrocities. Public actors responsible for sexual violence will now be held accountable to the global society, not just to citizens of their own countries. By insisting on women's position at the centre of global civil society and by ensuring that sexual violence is a serious crime, the Women's Caucus created a new instrument for making states more accountable to women for preventing and prosecuting the human rights violations from which they predominately suffer.

Polarized positions on sex work and trafficking

A context in which the human rights framework has failed to bridge ideological divides is over the issue of the trafficking of women and girls in the sex trade. In December 2000, over 80 countries signed the Protocol to Suppress, Prevent and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, sponsored by the UN Centre for International Crime Prevention, in Palermo, Italy. The definitions of trafficking and sex work, and disagreements about the nature and scale of the problem, were the subject of intense and deeply polarized debate between the key women's groups in two transnational lobbies, the International Human Rights Network and the Human Rights Caucus. Both laid claim to the feminist and "human rights" label as a legitimating tactic; both also highlighted their networks in developing countries, particularly South and Southeast Asia.

The International Human Rights Network had at its core an international NGO with an "abolitionist" perspective on sex work: the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women. This group views prostitution as a form of sexual violence which women would not undertake if given a meaningful and free choice, and therefore sees sex work as a human rights violation; in this view anyone who helps women to migrate in order to engage in sex work is a trafficker.³⁵ The opposing camp embraced the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women and the Asian Women's Human Rights Council as well as other sex workers' rights groups and human rights groups. Central to their position were the perspectives of the global sex workers' rights movement, in which sex work is recognized as labour, as a form of employment chosen by women, and as an expression of women's sexuality. Trafficking occurs in this perspective if women are forced to migrate for, or forced to engage in, sex work; official policies to deal with this problem must respect women's agency and determine whether they have consented to sex work and migration.

At issue were conceptions of female agency, sexuality, consent, and the coercive impact of state-level efforts to "protect" women. A member of the sex workers' lobby noted that

historically, anti-trafficking measures have been used against sex workers themselves, rather than against “traffickers”.³⁶ They argued that force or deception was a necessary condition in the definition of trafficking; also that “trafficking” and “prostitution” should not be linked in the Protocol, as men, women and children are trafficked for a large variety of services, including sweatshop labour and agriculture. However, ultimately the UN Trafficking Protocol did not make a distinction between forced and free migration for sex work, and the victim does not have to demonstrate that she has been forced; a human rights abuse is assumed.³⁷ This is seen by sex workers as feeding into contemporary anxieties about immigration and asylum seeking, and about female independence, where the socially accepted view is that women should be subjugated to the family (see also chapter 7).

Other instances where “human rights” have not proved inclusive

Similar problems associated with women’s agency and sexuality have divided women’s organizations and movements on issues of homosexuality, and abuses of people identifying themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and intersexed.³⁸ Indigenous people’s movements have challenged the individualistic basis of Western liberal human rights frameworks in contrast to notions of rights grounded in group identities, cultures and ways of being.

Another concern raised about the human rights approach in transnational feminism is that it privileges lawyers, and focuses on national laws and international treaties and their implementation. Critics argue that the stress on legality is misplaced,³⁹ and promotes standards of economic and social rights unattainable in many settings. Rights-based approaches presuppose a functioning and accountable state, where recourse may be had to the law by citizens or groups. In countries where legal systems are under-resourced or discredited through corruption, states may be less than efficient about prosecuting their own laws and bringing rights violators to book, let alone delivering on their international legal commitments. This

realization has intensified the efforts of domestic women’s movements to improve national capacity to reform and implement legislation with a bearing on women’s rights. Their ambitions and horizons have expanded, and they have gone on to develop a feminist critique of contemporary “good governance” reforms.

Economic justice: New feminist activism

Transnational women’s movements have developed their own response to the impacts of the neoliberal macroeconomic policies of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in the context of trade liberalization. A coherent feminist critique of market-driven and economic austerity policies emerged at the 1994 UN Social Summit in Copenhagen. At the Summit, the Women’s Global Alliance for Development Alternatives linked regional networks of women’s associations into a Women’s Caucus that proposed far-reaching amendments to the Summit’s Declaration and Platform for Action. These stressed the importance of regulating markets in the interest of reducing inequalities, preventing instability and expanding employment; sought the taxation of international financial speculative transactions and other politically destabilizing or environmentally harmful forms of profit seeking; and demanded that multilateral economic machinery such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the WTO should be accountable to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and human rights treaty monitoring bodies.⁴⁰ Subsequent feminist critiques of free trade have successfully exposed its failure to contribute to poverty reduction.

Activism on trade and investment is a fast-growing area of transnational women’s mobilization. Some groups focus upon creating new mechanisms to negotiate environmental and labour standards with international corporations, and monitor their compliance. The most visible activity is within the “anti-globalization” movement; here women’s groups have taken up the task of critiquing the WTO’s mandate and governance and examining regional trade agreements. The South-based International Gender and Trade Network focuses on the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD),

the WTO, and the Free Trade Area of the Americas as well as the Cotonou/African Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Agreement. The Europe-based Informal Working Group on Gender and Trade is evolving into a permanent Women's Caucus at the WTO, using its Trade Policy Review Mechanism as an entry point through which to develop gender-sensitive impact assessment of trade policy. The Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice attempts to influence macroeconomic policy-making via the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

A major concern of transnational women's activism on trade issues is the way export-led growth may be premised on cheap female labour, and the way the ferocious competition involved in free trade can provoke a "race to the bottom" in labour standards (see chapter 3). Tactics to counter this, as well as the inequitable exemptions that rich countries are adept at negotiating through the WTO, have included putting pressure on the WTO to support sustainable development by employing existing "special and differential treatment provisions" to promote poverty reduction and gender equity in poor countries.

As in the broader anti-globalization movement there are several sometimes contradictory strands to women's economic justice movements. Cheap female labour in the South draws jobs away from women in the North; thus the economic interests of Southern and Northern women tend to conflict—a division mirrored within international activist movements. Campaigns on labour and environmental standards may have the effect of driving women in the South out of work, or into impossible-to-regulate informal employment or enterprise. Anxiety about the environmental consequences of aggressive trade-led growth is counter-balanced by anxiety that environmental controls deny poor countries the capacity to export their commodities and develop their industries as rich countries have already done. These conflicts of economic interest pose a challenge to coalition building. Transnational women's economic justice groups continue to debate whether their members should have a common agenda and critique, or whether they should simply act as solidarity networks to support members from the South.

Notes

- 1 Weldon 2002:97.
- 2 Randall 1987.
- 3 Molyneux 2001:3.
- 4 Beckwith 2004:4.
- 5 Beckwith 2001:372; Weldon 2004:3.
- 6 Baldez 2002:14.
- 7 Molyneux 2001:145.
- 8 Molyneux 2001: 146.
- 9 Molyneux 2001:146–52.
- 10 Huntington 1991.
- 11 Goven 1993, cited in Fodor, E. 2004a.
- 12 Einhorn 1993.
- 13 Adamik 1993; Einhorn 1993.
- 14 Fodor 2004:14, referring to Graf 2003.
- 15 Brand 1998; Salame 1994; Lazreg 2004:6.
- 16 Lazreg 2004.
- 17 Dobrowsky and Hart 2003.
- 18 Tripp 2000:195.
- 19 Mikell 2003:14.
- 20 Jaffrelot 1996.
- 21 Menon 2000; Basu 2004.
- 22 Basu 1995.
- 23 Bouvier 2004:19.
- 24 Paidar 2002.
- 25 Lazreg 2004:27.
- 26 Rupp 1997; Boulding 1993.
- 27 Petchesky 2003.
- 28 Said and Desai 2003.
- 29 Silliman 1999:152, cited in Petchesky 2000:28.
- 30 Sen 2004:4.
- 31 Ackerly and D'Costa 2004:3.
- 32 CEDAW 1999, Article 4.
- 33 Spees 2003: 1.
- 34 Prakash 2002: 4115.
- 35 Doezema 2004:chapter 1.
- 36 Doezema 2004.
- 37 Sen 2003:140.
- 38 Ackerly and D'Costa 2004:15–18.
- 39 Sen 2003:145.
- 40 Petchesky 2000:28.