Women's Movements across Borders: Towards a More Inclusive Conceptualization?

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X14000130

Regardless of the country where one lives, gendered discrimination and outright misogyny are commonplace. In particular, violence against women remains one of the most widespread and pervasive challenges to women's rights. It crosses all boundaries, geographical and social. Economic inequalities within and across countries continue to expand with gendered patterns. Significant gaps remain in education, employment, and healthcare, among many other things. So, the answer to the question, "Do we need a women's movement?" seems obvious. But what form should the mobilization take? Is it the work of a women's movement? A feminist movement? Where do other social justice movements fit in? Where should mobilization take place: locally, nationally, transnationally, or globally? How do we deal with difference? Can universal messages that unite across borders also deal with the unique circumstances of particular locations? In this piece, I pick up on some of the themes raised by other participants in this forum and elaborate on them in global perspective. My intent is not to apply logics of the United States movements elsewhere, but instead to propose insight gathered from broader comparative and transnational studies that might be applied to this discussion.

Different Forms of Gendered Mobilization

One of the themes in this forum is the relationship between women's movements and feminist movements. As noted by Schreiber (this volume), the U.S. women's movement is frequently (and problematically) conflated with the feminist movement. The need to distinguish feminist movements from women's movements, or even women in movements, is frequently articulated in comparative gender studies. Yet, at the same time, making that distinction is not so easy. While women's and feminist movements are conceptually distinct and distinguishable, in practice they are interrelated and overlapping (Beckwith 2000, 436). Because the real world is messier than are our conceptual definitions, where and how specific feminist goals play a role in mobilizations should be an open empirical question (Ferree and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X14000130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mueller 2004). It is not that typologies should be rejected outright. Rather, typologies used in rigid ways may preclude activism aimed at and/or resulting in improved situations for women. Thus, we must guard against narrow definitions of feminist mobilization that may end up excluding groups already at the margins.

It is important to consider groups and individuals who have conscientiously distanced themselves from feminism (see Schreiber and Corrigan, this volume). Some individuals do this because they do not identify ideologically with the goals of feminism(s). Although, as Schreiber suggests, even conservative women might occasionally align with feminists. Some groups, however, distance themselves even though they have similar or related goals to feminists. The distancing may be strategic, an attempt to survive the backlash of antifeminism that is present not just in the United States (see Corrigan, this volume), but also globally. In some parts of the world, feminism is identified as a Western construct, and thus identifying with it can make hostile environments more difficult to navigate. Some women reject the label because of complicated histories with what are seen as imperialist feminisms, including those associated with Western, white, and/or middle class movements. Narrow typologies that dismiss these groups, or that ignore their hesitancies and include them as *de facto* feminists, miss out on some important areas of inquiry or possibilities for coalition. To do so reinforces perceptions of feminism as imperialist either via exclusion or by the dismissal of concerns in favor of false claims to solidarity, thus instigating conscientious distancing (see Hancock, this volume).

Women also choose to pursue issues of concern through other social justice movements. Women's participation in antipoverty, antiwar, and antiracism movements may not be overtly gendered but has important gendered implications. While these movements have been the site of misogynist practices, they are also the site of important feminist work that may be overlooked when we stick to rigid typologies.

Global or Local Mobilization?

Discussions of women's movements in the United States are usually narrow, not only in their emphasis on feminism but also in regard to the emphasis on the United States. But it is increasingly difficult to understand domestic mobilizations without paying attention to transnational activism. This has been particularly true when looking at activism aimed at combating violence against women. In my book, *From Global to Grassroots: The*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X14000130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

European Union, Transnational Advocacy, and Combating Violence Against Women (Montoya 2013), I explore how transnational processes have become a part of domestic advocacy efforts in the European Union member and candidate states. But these processes are not unique to Europe. U.S. women's organizations have been involved and influenced by cross-border organizing throughout history. Yet studies of these movements do not always note transnational components.

What is missed by failing to incorporate the role of transnational activism in our understanding of domestic movements? U.S. activist organizations and activists have long participated in global conferences, and despite some imperialist tendencies, it seems likely that these interactions have influenced discourses and strategies. The influence of international organizations, such as the United Nations, may be different for the United States, perhaps most notably demonstrated by its failure to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. That does not mean, however, that the United States is completely immune to external influences. Nor does it preclude U.S. women's organizations from accessing and benefiting from the numerous benefits and resources that come from transnational networks. In fact, there is much U.S. organizations can learn from the innovative organizing strategies of women operating in restrictive political environments and with minimal resources.

Transnational organizing may have even more to offer to marginalized groups. These groups might find areas of commonality with women from other countries who might occupy different geographical locations but similar social ones. Such affinities have been noted among indigenous women's organizations as well as among women connecting across other social dimensions. Few studies systematically examine the transnational connections and interactions of contemporary U.S. women's and feminist organizing, particularly moving beyond our more immediate borders. International partnerships among local women's shelters constitute a particularly intriguing example of such transnational activism.

Dealing with Difference: Transnational Methodologies?

One of the biggest challenges for women's transnational and domestic organizing has been how to deal with difference. There is a significant problem in the creation of any imagined community that relies upon mobilizing one dimension of identity. Yet, glossing over differences among women can be extraordinarily divisive. Finding a way to balance

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universal messages designed to unite with the need to acknowledge women's different lived realities is crucial if the goal is to improve the lives of all women. The transnational movement to combat violence against women provides a strong example for the need for (and sometimes accomplishment of) balancing universality with a more particularized understanding of difference. While gender-based violence crosses all borders, how it is experienced and the types of solutions that are necessary to address it are deeply entrenched in social location. Ignoring difference is not only alienating for groups left out of the discourse; it also precludes successful strategies for addressing and hopefully eliminating violence against women.

When we start taking difference more seriously, we also need to consider that sometimes feminist movements and women's movements (at least as they are more narrowly defined) are not always the answer or are not alone the answer. There can be movements where gender is not the primary mobilizing factor or where women's rights and status are not central to the effort that can nonetheless have a significant impact on the well-being of women. For example, violence against women has structural roots in economic inequalities (True 2012). Thus, activism aimed at taking on neoliberalism, such as recent Occupy Wall Street and antiausterity protests, may have critical implications for reducing violence against women. In fact, many challenges facing women today can be traced to the neoliberal global economic order, including the perils faced by women in the United States in the domains of health care, education, and employment, among others. Thus, women participating in these mobilizations, whether or not they are in a women's movement or a feminist movement, can be doing important feminist work.

Conclusion

Given the current state of the world and the massive gendered equalities that persist, the question is not, "Do we need a U.S. women's movement?" but rather, what kind of *movements* do we need? The problems facing women are too big, widespread, and yet particularized for there to be just one kind of movement. We need a whole range of goals and strategies that take into account context, difference, and location. We need feminist movements. We need women's movements with feminist goals. We need social justice movements that address the issues affecting women and that incorporate a gendered analysis. These

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movements exist, and they do not exist in vacuums. There is room for collaboration, for the transversal politics of coalition building. While there are times when we need conceptual or strategic distinctions and distancing, holding to rigid dichotomies can limit the capacity of scholars and/or activists to see the world as it exists or in imagining its transformative potential.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X14000130 Published online by Cambridge University Press