

Global Feminism

Global **feminism** is the global application of feminist thought, displaying both unique and overlapping characteristics in its focus as it advocates for a positive and culturally relevant change in women's outcomes. The concept of intersectionality that emerged from Black Feminist thought and its emphasis on race, postcolonial **feminism**, and emerging postmodern and poststructuralist thought have been instrumental in forming the framework of global **feminism**. It is also thought of as part of the third wave of **feminism**.

Third wave **feminism** is composed of cultural, postcolonial, and postmodern **feminism**. The three major characteristics of third wave **feminism** apply to global **feminism** as well. These include the acceptance of multiple narratives in diverse localities versus the metanarrative of second wave **feminism**; the acceptance of social activism in sociopolitical space for assorted causes instead of theoretical stabilizing and unifying intellectualism; and finally, an attempt to create coalitions rather than a single entity of an organization to address gender concerns. This movement has brought together cultures and issues affecting women under a broad and unifying framework of feminist thought that has emerged from countries outside the Western hemisphere.

Agenda

The agenda of global **feminism** is to be able to respond to local-level concerns of women while integrating the goals of earlier feminist movements and their philosophies into their mission and actions. Global **feminism** has given voice to varying feminist thoughts and agendas. These issues include human rights, social justice, the concept of "othering," acceptance of a universal sisterhood, and the issue of inequality. The conflict between the overarching goals of liberal universalism and local cultural realities are central to this debate. One illustration of this debate is the goal of mainstream/liberal **feminism** to be recognized as equal by their communities, and identifying the traditional cultural practices that act as a barrier in accomplishing this goal.

There are two major contentions proposed by those practicing or identifying with global **feminism**. These include those living outside the United States, and the ethnic and cultural minorities residing within the United States and in other Western countries. The first questions gender as a social construct having unilateral primacy, and argues for the recognition of multiple and simultaneous oppressions from various social constructs, such as categorizations of class, caste, and urban/rural living. The second issue is a reflection on women being perceived as oppressive—as a part of developed societies or higher up in institutional-communities.

As an illustration, nationalistic sentiments and their associated movements are central to postcolonial feminist thinking. However, the same nationalism that is valued in postcolonial feminist thinking is perceived as patriarchal in second wave **feminism**. Also, while global **feminism** concurs with mainstream **feminism** that universal rights for women are desirable, global feminists also fear and dispute typologies that use cultural practices as a way of creating a hierarchy of values, and consequently the societies and people within them. Thus, global **feminism** argues for cultural relativism as an appropriate strategy to approach universalism. The genesis of global **feminism** occurred because academics from countries like Iran and India dispute the essentialist victimized status ascribed to their national and social identity; similar responses come from women who have formed multicultural identities after migrating to developed countries, and continue to shape global **feminism**.

Key Issues, Methods, and Tenets

The key issues being addressed within global **feminism** include environmental activism, domestic violence laws, work and globalization, and the role of religion. In most of these instances, the causal mechanism around issues like environmental degradation, the exploitation of cheap and unskilled labor, and religious identity (particularly Muslim identity) can be traced to the developed world; therefore, it can be surmised that women from the non-Western world may feel constrained in identifying with a global sisterhood.

Trafficking of women from developing to developed countries has raised a number of parallels to global feminist thought. The female subject is seen as the "other," a sexualized object created by males and the colonial power. Thus, by inference, liberal **feminism** is working to support the very system of oppression and exploitation that exploits the most vulnerable in the ex-colonies. Global **feminism** methodologies are feminist, propose the situatedness of knowledge, theorize on differences, and expand the scope and scale of inequality discussions by also studying the difference between subjects of study and the objective researcher or writer who represents their reality. The discussion within global **feminism** includes gender-women's sisterhood as essentializing and outlining the scope of masculinities and femininities, particularly in light of globalization.

Shirley Lim proposes that the issue right now is that of the U.S. system and not a simple open market (and liberalization), but the export of the U.S. system through media, technology, power, and politics, and the taking over of physical and abstract spaces comprising norms and culture. Also, the onset of globalization and its material culture extends the concept of intersectionalities and the identification of race, class, gender, nationalities, language, and multiplicity of constructing **feminism** to reflective global **feminism**.

United Nations-based agencies like the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) have encouraged the establishment of grassroots feminist movements. These agencies have paved the way for antiliberalization movements.

The grassroots-level movements that are part of the global **feminism** paradigm have difficulty working exclusively with women or addressing exclusively women's concerns. This is both because society is collectivist, and because women themselves identify with group concerns of family and community and not solely with womanhood or sisterhood. Additionally, many women in less developed countries must contend with the transfer of resources and meeting basic necessities, thus making it difficult for them to consider gender-based inequalities their primary concern. For instance, women in rural areas of north India are fighting against liberalization that is leaving them with less than before, out-migration from entire villages, local markets being taken over by wholesale producers, and living in urban slums without basic necessities—the concerns of a community struggling against class and caste. In Bangladesh, women are struggling to establish their right to practice a secular Islam instead of Islamic fundamentalism. There are women supporting both ends of this spectrum.

The contradiction of global **feminism** with socialist, liberal, and radical **feminism** comes from multiple sources. First, women in the developed world are able to operate in resource-rich societies with institutions that largely function according to established and legal expectations, and thus continue to have a level of accountability. On the other hand, in developing countries, resource-strapped societies are also bogged down by institutions and government that have poorer performance and less accountability. Also, in developed countries, class remains an issue, but it is largely framed within the context of state-supported capitalism: even though there is a stark divide between the "haves" and the "have-nots," the perception of an equitable opportunity structure makes class appear to be based more on individual attributes than social attributes. In developing countries, conversely, socialism or communism is an accepted way of life, and class has always been thought to originate in structural inequity, and as such, class affinity is strong and takes precedence in sociopolitical discussions, even after the advent of liberalization and open markets. Additionally, in developed countries, women have

access to basic necessities, such as a high school education, minimum wage jobs, and basic housing. Their struggle is therefore to strive for the next level of needs, such as fighting discrimination in the workplace, gaining equality in promotion, and finding a place in public life in a simplistic translation of the feminist agenda.

The agenda in developing countries is still focused on more immediate rights to life, such as access to schools, preventing female infanticide, anti-dowry legislation, and putting an end to child marriages. These are concerns that are relevant in specific cultural and class contexts. For example, the fact that women have been in the highest position of power and authority in a few developing countries, such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, could be perceived as inequity being a function of class rather than gender. However, instantaneous communication and easy access to information, ideas, and thoughts have made it easier to identify commonalities and differences among individuals and groups across the boundaries of nation-states. The current era prefers nondualistic constructions, much in keeping with the poststructuralist thought.

Despite these differences, gender-related concerns that would have otherwise been submerged in the local class, caste, and community preferences were given a name and voice under the aegis of Western feminist thought. The most successful example is the global campaign to prevent violence against women, particularly against traditional and culturally sanctioned practices like female genital mutilation and spousal rape.

Global **feminism** has recently been termed *cosmopolitan feminism* by Martha Nussbaum. Discussions of cosmopolitan **feminism** address the problems of patriarchy and capitalism in the same realm. Cosmopolitan **feminism** also tries to find a position that moves away from universalizing gender to framing women's concerns in the human rights paradigm. Niamh Reilly proposes that a cross-boundary dialogue, networking, and social criticism will make **feminism** relevant in the global context. The underlying tenet in global **feminism** needs to be that women with education and comfortable lifestyles, referred to as "elites" in both Western and non-Western contexts, might not have the experiences to justify their right to speak on the behalf of women who are living in a relative or absolute absence of resources. However, it is the duty of all women to raise the question of gender inequality and work toward greater equity.

—Shweta Singh

Further Readings

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