

**ESF Exploratory Workshop on
Feminisms and Activism: Transversal Politics in Contemporary Europe
and across the Globe**

Nicosia, Cyprus, 12 - 16 September 2007

Background

Since the Beijing+ Review in 2000, a growing sense of unease in the international women's movement can be observed, one that borders on crisis.

This unease became apparent during discussions in the Rockefeller-funded seminar on Human Security, Globalization and Gender co-organized from 2003-2004 by the National Council for Research on Women and the CUNY Graduate School Center for the Study of Women and Society. Discussions on the "crisis" were also held at meetings of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, and at meetings of feminists, including in advance of the World Social Forum at Mumbai in January 2004. Feminists and women NGOs from different parts of the world are faced with a new set of challenges in moving forward with global women's/feminist activism.

In this context, many feminist organizers and activists have been feeling a certain sense of crisis, of being at an ideological and political crossroads, of experiencing 'diminishing returns' to their activism and having to question themselves and others whether the strategies they were working with for years, such as constructing 'human rights as women's rights', are still useful, and whether certain feminist victories, such as 'gender mainstreaming', have indeed been victories or just ways of co-optation. Issues such as whether or not the EU and the UN should continue to be used as major site of feminist global activism as well as alternative transnational sites like the World Social Forum, in what ways the new international agenda, economic, political and religious, should affect global feminist work, and to what extent, as well as in what ways, feminist work should proceed inside and outside institutions and NGOs, in local and global sites, and within specific cultural and political frameworks.

In sum, the feminist movement is faced with issues of diversity and intersectionality; issues of participation and representation; issues of professionalisation and advocacy; and issues of accountability and decision-making mechanisms.

Scientific content of the event

The ESF Exploratory Workshop entitled "Feminisms and Activism: Transversal Politics in Contemporary Europe and across the Globe" was convened by Susana Pavlou of the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) and Professor Nira Yuval Davis, University of London, on the 12-16 September 2007 in Nicosia, Cyprus. The workshop was co-sponsored by the Global Fund for Women.

The ESF Exploratory Workshop 'Feminisms and Activism: Transversal Politics in Contemporary Europe and across the Globe' brought together a group of key feminists who live across various countries across the globe and who have been involved in European and global feminist initiatives networks, in order to systematically address the tensions and uncertainties faced by the women's movement both on the European level and the global level. For this reason,

participants were selected based on their track record in feminist activism and research and all efforts have been made to ensure the diversity of participants and representation of all regions.

The participants came from eight European countries – West, East, North and South, as well as from North and South America, the Philippines, India and Sri Lanka. They came from a range of backgrounds – academics working on gender and sexuality issues, development, human rights, and advocates on health and violence against women, feminist publishing and those working on conflict resolution. It was exploratory in nature and raised some of the most crucial issues, both theoretical and political, which relate to contemporary feminist activism. The participants also represented all age groups, ranging from their mid twenties to their late sixties.

It was recognized, at the outset of the workshop, that the issues to be discussed in the workshop need to be seen within their local, regional and global contexts. One of the most important feminist epistemological insights relates to the situatedness of knowledge and imagination. Indeed, this was the reason it was deemed essential for the workshop to include participants from different countries, inside and outside Europe, and from minorities as well as hegemonic majorities within these countries. At the same time, it was also decided that the workshop would attempt to find common threads to issues facing feminist activism which encompass their differential contexts. This was proved possible due to both the broadly shared values of the participants as well as their shared dialogical knowledge based on previous experiences of feminist networking, local, regional and global.

It was decided to focus on two major issues. In some ways these issues are not just specific to feminist movements but also to other emancipatory social movements, but at the same time, they have specific feminist configurations. The first issue concerned the relationship between feminism and human rights. At the outset of the second wave of feminism in the 1960's and 1970's, it defined itself as a liberation movement rather than as a women/human rights movement, but this has been transformed during the 1990's. The workshop, discussed the advantages as well as the costs of this transformation.

The second issue related to the organizational facet of the feminist movement and especially to issues relating to its mechanisms of decision making. This theme also discussed what is sometimes called 'the NGOisation of the women's movement'. In other words, the transformation from a broad social movement whose key principles are autonomy and self organisation in many different global configurations to what in some places is largely a collection of funded organisation which are vulnerable to submitting to priorities decided by external donors. A third sub-theme emerged during the discussions on both these issues, which related to the problem of intergenerational reproduction of the movement.

'Women's rights as human rights' has been an umbrella terminology of many, if not most, feminist struggles, since the mid 1990's, after the UN Vienna conference on human rights. The discussion focused on the costs as well as the advantages of transforming the discourse of women's liberation to that of women's rights. It was pointed out that the discourse of human rights has replaced, to a large extent, the discourse of liberation and emancipation, during the post cold war era and that an individualistic construction of 'rights' could easily – and indeed – has been co-opted by neo-liberal organizations such as the World Bank, as well as during the US response to 9/11 and the intervention in Afghanistan. This discourse also often constructs women as victims and can be an undemocratic tool used to impose change from above. While many women's rights advocates working in Iraq,

Afghanistan or other conflict contexts do appeal to universal values including human rights, they find that their task has been made much more difficult by the use of rights discourses by the occupying powers, who nevertheless make decisions which increase the power of conservative and fundamentalist forces and have little genuine commitment to equality.

It was also pointed out that the discourse of human rights can also be interpreted, as was debated at the UN conference on Human Rights in Vienna, as collective rights whether these are to collective 'cultural rights' or to national self determination. In such cases, women's gendered roles symbolising 'culture and tradition' and their role in the collectivity to educate and reinforce this normative form of culture and tradition constitutes a central area of contestation. Often conservative and fundamentalist forces – who may represent states or political organisations - also use the language and arenas of human rights to struggle for their demands.

At the same time it was pointed out how indispensable the discourse of human rights has been in terms inspiring and mobilizing mass campaigns as well as of its crucial importance in struggles aimed to achieve specific legislation and policy to defend women's rights, because of its insistence on holding states accountable. Other useful frameworks like 'human security' or the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum were briefly raised as possible alternatives to human rights. But participants differed according to whether they were working within a human rights framework. Many were involved in bringing understandings of 'gender integration' into the frame of human rights and were simultaneously involved in defending and transforming the discussions within human rights bodies such as the Human Rights Council. The evolving debate on economic, social and cultural rights in particular, has begun to embrace notions of human security while extending the idea of state of accountability to implementation of rights as well as passing of legislation that guarantees rights. Meanwhile, with many, particularly women human rights defenders facing high levels of attacks on the political projects in which they are engaged (minority movements, sexuality movements, challenging fundamentalism or majoritarian nationalism, challenging the neo-liberal consensus), the classic work of human rights holding governments accountable for major civil and political rights violations remains of prime importance.

The importance of the notion of women as citizens was mentioned in that context, as it was enacted especially in Latin America and in parts of Asia such as India and the Philippines. In these the advantages of democracy which is being built from below and in which feminists individually and collectively have remained part of broader social movements, have partly countered the complete 'NGOisation' of the movement. Many of these movements are involved with the human rights movement but also other civil society movements such as the World Social Forum, AWID and DAWN (two important women and development networks).

It was pointed out, however, that citizenship rights are national rights and most states have not fully signed all international human rights frameworks. This also excludes all too often the rights of migrants and 'people on the move' who are often women.

Legislation, nevertheless, has been a crucial tool for emancipatory social change and could help the battle to ensure accountability and transparency for instance through the passing of legislation on the 'right to information' in India through the pressure of mass movements mobilising. At the same time it was also pointed out how these days legislation, under the rubric of compliance with international standards on non-discrimination is often used more as a rhetorical device and a way for states (East European states wishing to join the EU were particularly singled out in this, but they

are by no mean exceptional) to present a positive image without any real 'teeth' to back up new legislation. In some cases, existing actual social protection such as child care provision is lost. Another example is anti-discrimination legislation permitting gay marriage without any rights to pension or other benefits. The 'tabula rasa' of states either deny their communists pasts or are being built as if they are new as in 'post-conflict' states in Africa,

The importance of professional legal work under human rights and mainstreaming frameworks linked directly to the second focus of the workshop, ie decision making mechanisms within the feminist movement. Specific 'women's rights as human rights' struggles often have to be fought in courts and other professional legislative forums. This means that mass based social movements have been replaced by professional advocates and NGOs which are neither accountable nor representative of the majority of feminists, let alone women.

The discussion, however, also analyzed the lack of accountability and representativeness of consensual decisions which were the more traditional feminist mode of operation. It was pointed out that using consensus as the decision making mechanism tended to obscure power relations within groups and organisations and to deny differences. Democracy is the negotiation of a conflict, not suppression of conflict.

It was in this context that a discussion arose about the meaning of women's and/or feminist solidarity – who it should include or exclude, what forms of alliance should be encouraged and who is it that is in alliance with whom. The relation between 'activists' and 'the people' was raised as particularly poignant re this issue, as was the notion (and desirability) of the autonomy of the women's movement and the relationships between activists, academics, women parliamentarians and 'femocrats'. The importance of keeping in sight the difference between 'feminists' and 'women' was raised in that context as well as the growing global activism of right wing and religious fundamentalist women. The need to repoliticise feminism, locally and globally, was claimed to be an urgent task. Feminist pedagogy, which exists through some leadership institutes, but needs wider application, was also felt to be an urgent need. The rise of new forms of identity politics is quite often dependent on a negation rather than an understanding of past struggles.

A related central issue to be discussed has been that of accountability. It was pointed out that all too often the accountability tends to be towards NGO funders, rather than the women the NGOs are working with. Moreover, it was pointed out that accountability under 'gender mainstreaming' all too often tends to become a technique to reduce support for women's rights and autonomous projects without actually bringing any substantive benefits.

A thread that ran throughout the discussions related to the notion of intersectionality, ie the need to avoid simplistic and divisive identity politics when analyzing feminist politics and organization and recognizing the specific class, ethnicity, sexuality, stage in the life cycle etc in the locations of particular feminist and other social actors. It was within this context that the crucial – but often very problematic – issue of the intergenerational relations within feminist movements and organizations was raised. The feminist 'tyranny of structurelessness' that affects so radically decision making processes within feminist organizations also tends to exclude younger and 'different' women from the decision making in-group.

Assessment of Results: Conclusions and the way forward

It was agreed by all participants that the meeting was very productive and managed to raise issues that are too often avoided in other feminist frameworks, both academic and activist. It was agreed that it is important to continue to discuss and develop these themes as this can prove useful not only to feminist activists but also to other NGO and human rights activists. It was emphasized, that in spite of the very different contexts in which the participants are working, contemplating on these issues would help everyone to sensitise them into considerations of accountable decision making mechanisms and intergenerational communication. Moreover, it would be crucial when dealing with funders, state agencies and supranational organizations.

It was therefore decided:

- To disseminate a detailed workshop report as widely as possible, using the extensive contacts of the participants in the workshop to most of the global feminist networks.
- To develop a shorter common statement from the workshop and others who were invited but could not participate to circulate among feminist networks, policy holders etc.
- To continue to interact and discuss the issues raised in the workshop and exchange papers on the subject via both the email group established towards the workshop and widely via a new website.
- To explore the possibility of publishing the papers of the workshop and some other related ones from potential participants who could not attend the meeting in the form of a book.
- To explore the possibility of future meetings, probably under the ESF Forward Looks programme, in which the policy implications of the workshop discussions could be developed further.

Final Programme

Wednesday 12 September 2007

All day *Arrival of Participants and registration*

Thursday 13 September 2007

- 09:00 – 09:30 *Welcome and Registration*
- 09:30 – 10:00 **Presentation of the European Science Foundation (ESF)**
Naomi Segal (Standing Committee for the Humanities)
- 10:00 – 11:30 **Introduction and Outline of the Workshop: Expectations**
Chair: **Nira Yuval Davis**
- Panel: **Susana Pavlou, Kristen Timothy, Myria Vassiliadou,**
- 11:30 – 12:00 *Coffee Break*
- 12:00 – 13:00 **Introduction and Outline of the Workshop: Expectations**
(continued)
- 13:00 – 14:30 *Lunch*
- 14:00 – 16:00 Women's Rights as Human Rights
Chair: **Gita Sahgal**
- Panel: **Sunila Abeysekera, Ewa Charkiewicz, Kalpana Kannibaran**
- 16:00– 16:30 *Coffee Break*
- 16:30 – 17:30 Women's Rights as Human Rights *(continued)*
- 20:30 – 23:00 *Dinner – Zanettos Tavern (minibus pick-up at 20:15)*

Friday 14 September 2007

- 09:30 – 11:00 Feminism and Decision-Making Mechanisms
Working Groups
- 11:00 – 11:30 *Coffee Break*
- 11:30 – 12:30 **Plenary Session**
- 12:30 – 13:30 *Lunch*
- 13:30 – 15:30 Feminism and Decision-Making Mechanisms
Chair: **Virginia Vargas**
- Panel: **Sylvia Estrada Claudio, Djurdja Knezevic, Pragna Patel**
- 15:30 – 16:00 *Coffee Break*
- 16:00 – 17:30 Feminism and Decision-Making Mechanisms *(continued)*
- 20:30 – 23:00 *Dinner (Estiades Restaurant – minibus pick-up at 20:15)*

Saturday 15 September 2007

09:30 – 11:00	Women's Rights as Human Rights Working Groups
11:00 – 11:30	<i>Coffee Break</i>
11:30 – 12:30	Plenary Session
12:30 – 13:30	<i>Lunch</i>
13:30 – 15:30	Vision, Recommendations and Future Steps Chair: Nira Yuval-Davis Panel: Linda Basch, Susana Pavlou, Myria Vassiliadou
15:30 – 16:00	<i>Coffee Break</i>

(EXCURSION TO NICOSIA OLD TOWN)

20:30 – 23:00	<i>Farewell Dinner (Tzellari Restaurant – minibus pick-up at 20:15)</i>
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Sunday 16 September 2007

Morning	<i>Departure</i>
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Final List of Participants

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Statistical information on Participants

Repartition by country of work:

BE	1
CY	3
DE	1
ES	1
HR	1
HU	1
IN	1
LK	1
NL	1
PE	1
PH	1
UK	4
US	2

Repartition by gender: 19 F.