

Futures of Feminism: Hope and Despair

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As we know, gendered work is essentially interdisciplinary, which means that it is dispersed over a wide spectrum of outlets that might see themselves as part of a particular field of enquiry rather than another – sociology, politics, political economy, law, anthropology etc. The audience of these outlets is therefore also dispersed, not including many who would find the connections made in gendered work as outlandish, artificial or marginal to the main focus of disciplinary and disciplined work. We constantly seem to be worrying about our audience – should we publish in mainstream journals or feminist ones, journals of our core disciplines, where we might not get an engaged audience, or those that are multi-disciplinary feminist one, which might be speaking to the already converted. Either way, we gain/lose in different ways – politically, professionally and in terms of our own modes of writing, which often for us are also modes of being. The ‘othering’ that we experience in our professional lives then becomes an impulse to write but also denies us audiences that would help us challenge these divided worlds/works. We need spaces in which to bring our various insights, approaches, disciplines and conversations together to speak in many tongues about our concerns about the ‘state of gender politics’ today. My work also seeks these open spaces, away from disciplinary constraints.

So, why hope and despair? In a generous and thoughtful review of my latest book, *Gender Politics of Development*, Prof. Sylvia Chant noted that, I “In fact my only criticism of this otherwise inspired and inspiring book is that Rai’s... conclusion does not offer a more positive repertoire of ‘future dreams’”; that it is negative in its conclusion”. This criticism made me think and review my work but I continue to hold that the world that we inhabit today allows us great latitude of hope but also constrains possibilities of transformation that we struggle towards. It is this balance sheet of hope and despair that I will share with you

today, and in doing so outline some challenges that the future of feminism as well as future feminisms face.

First, the balance sheet. On the credit side of this historical ledger we note the following: In terms of political rights, women have the right to vote and stand for elections at all levels of government in most countries now. As early as 1985 ninety percent of countries had either established formal national machineries or policy agencies for the advancement of women or less formal governance systems to address gender in/equalities. Around forty countries operate some sort of quota for women in parliaments and around fifty in major political parties; from 1945 to 1995, women increased their presence in parliaments four-fold, and in 2007 just over seventeen percent of national members of parliaments are women. 185 countries have signed the Convention for the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), though many with opt-out clauses, are legally bound to put its provisions into practice. They are also committed to submit national reports, at least every four years, on measures they have taken to comply with their treaty obligations. The signatories are legally bound to put its provisions into practice and to present a report every four years on the measures they are taking to comply with their treaty obligations.

However, on the debit side of this balance sheet we notice that despite these significant gains in institutional politics, the 2010 UN Report on the State of the World's Women shows that women continue to be underrepresented in national parliaments, where on average only 17 per cent of seats are occupied by women. The share of women among ministers also averages 17 per cent. The highest positions are even more elusive: only 7 of 150 elected Heads of State in the world are women, and only 11 of 192 Heads of Government. The situation is similar at the level of local government... Of the 500 largest corporations in the world, only 13 have a female chief executive officer.

The socio-economic balance sheet is equally complex. The indicators of economic inequality pertaining to gender have continued to persist and even grow. According to the UN Report on the Status of the World's Women 2010, "Globally, women's participation in the labour market remained steady in the two decades from 1990 to 2010, hovering around 52 per cent. In contrast, global labour force participation rates for men declined steadily over the same period, from 81 to 77 per cent...[but] Horizontal and vertical job segregation has

resulted in a persistent gender pay gap everywhere". The World Development Report, 2012 reports that forty per cent of the global labour force is women but further that in all developing countries, women still earn on average about 22 % less than men after taking into account differences in observed skills and each year, 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders; women and girls make up the majority trafficked for sexual exploitation".

The UN Report and the WDR 2012 show that "Women continue to bear most of the responsibilities for the home... In all regions, women spend at least twice as much time as men on unpaid domestic work. Women who are employed spend an inordinate amount of time on the double burden of paid work and family responsibilities; when unpaid work is taken into account, women's total work hours are longer than men's in all regions..."

Decades after Esther Boserup brought to our attention women's contribution to agrarian economies, a mere 2% of farmers are registered as women, despite the full participation of women in farming, especially among poor peasant households. Oxfam has reported that over ninety countries did not meet the deadline of 2005 for eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education. We also note that women's social position continues to be precarious – levels of violence against women (both individual and state) remain significant. Each year, 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders; women and girls make up the majority trafficked for sexual exploitation"; in the UK alone 1990s saw a doubling of men paying for sex acts¹. Son preference continues to disadvantage girls within households and puts the lives of women in danger through abortions/foeticides; in many countries pressures of dowry place women in vulnerable positions. The right to choice is denied in both the choice of partners (often through practices of misnamed 'honour crimes') as well as in sexual orientation. The world at war continues to visit severe and sexualized violence on women. We are well on the way of NOT achieving the gender equality measures set out in the Millennium Development Goals. In this context pessimism is not inexplicable; optimism remains starved of evidence.

¹ Banyard, Kat, The Equality Illusion; p. 2

To animate these rather dry if startling entries in our social ledger I will share with you two debates to which I have contributed and which illustrate the problem of agential optimism as I see it.

The first is the debate on work. While reviewing the literature on empowerment and its uses and abuses by governance systems of global capitalism, I worry that perhaps we have taken our eyes off the ball; that as Nancy Fraser has noted, the recognition of gender inequalities and injustices has not always translated into the redistribution of resources needed to address these. That the structural power of capitalism is closing off spaces of contestation even as it opens up markets in the name of extending choice. All those statistics that I reeled off earlier mean that, despite our best efforts to frame women not as victims but as agents, to extract ‘women’ from the trope of rescue, we are missing a trick if we do not connect the dots between feminist agency and neoliberal governance. That while it is only women’s struggles and alliances that lead to more equal futures, women’s agency cannot be mapped without assessing the risks that they take in challenging their oppression. Measuring agency needs to be accompanied by measuring vulnerability; to do one without the other can only be political irresponsible and ethically dubious.

So, when we hear of the feminization of labour or of increasing mobilisation of women into global capitalist labour markets, we need to write out, again, in that historical ledger a note about the nature of women’s work. Feminist economists have long been arguing that domestic work needs to be counted; methodologically there has been the development of time use surveys to measure women’s work in the home. They have also been arguing for making employment markets as well as credit more accessible to and equal for women. There has been a concern about child care, health and safety issues at work, equal opportunity, equal pay for equal work; the argument has been made about sharing of domestic work; there has been talk of the double burden that women carry (and sometimes of the triple burden – organizing for change as well as working inside and outside the home). But there has been little work done on what are the everyday consequences of the non-recognition of this work, which I (together with Catherine Hoskyns) have called ‘depletion’. The dictionary meaning of depletion is straightforward enough: ‘to decrease seriously or exhaust the abundance or supply of’, with synonyms such as, use up, drain,

reduce, consume and lessen. In essence, depletion seems to us to describe the condition of loss, without necessarily implying either its measurement or a process for replenishment that might offset it. We argue that a lack of an identification of harm, accruing from the non-recognition of depletion, allows depletion to subsidize both the market and the state. In doing so we connect the disconnected – we suggest that an insistence on reshaping the world of work, on challenging the gendered division of labour as well as the unequal and exploitative international division of labour is needed if women’s unrecognised agency as workers is not to become also the source of the depletion of their bodies, their households and their communities.

The second debate is that about political participation. Mobilising women into the public sphere attends risks for them also. Whether it is the banal violence in the theatre of Westminster or direct brutality of physical assault on many women working in the political arenas across the world, the costs ‘empowering’ women through participatory programmes can be catastrophic. Research has documented that many of the Labour women MPs in the UK could not continue in parliament because of the daily humiliations and masculinist political culture of Westminster. We all know many cases of state brutality – direct and discursive, illegal and normalised that attend upon women’s participation in political life. This violence raises many questions about the levels of risk involved for women in doing their work without adequate support, as well as of how to translate conscientisation into practical results when the structures of power are supported by political hierarchies at every level. While viewing women as agents, can we afford to overlook their vulnerabilities to the structures of oppression and inequality within which they live and which do make them victims as well as actors as they struggle for empowerment? An awareness of risk need not lead to a political paralysis or for exercise of agency without due regard to security. On the contrary, such an awareness can work towards a *sustainable participation*, drawing in more people for longer periods to engage in shaping change.

My final thought on the issue of measuring risks in the search of empowerment is this – often what is presented as empowerment is really a struggle for survival. I started thinking about this distinction some time ago when I read the Indian Canadian writer Rohinton Mistry’s fabulous book – *A Fine Balance*. What he describes in that epic story can of course be easily represented as triumph of spirit over adversity. However, what I could trace was

the nature of the Indian politics and economic inequalities such that all the energy that is put into surviving is often expended for short periods of calm before the next crisis. A cost benefit analysis of this energy would perhaps show us that the costs far outweigh the benefits, even though some of the characters survive while others go under. So, does this distinction between empowerment and survival strategies, the risks and costs attached to these, make a difference to our analysis? I think it does. By insisting upon counting costs, whether as depletion or more qualitatively in terms of violence, fragility etc., we are also insisting upon the recognition of structural barriers to empowerment; re-politicising the narrative about agency.

This complex historical ledger reveals many trends – of progress made through the struggles of women worldwide; of setbacks and backlash; of continuing political challenges, of fragilities and vulnerabilities as well as courage and vision. In this context then, how do we envision feminist futures? I would like to highlight three areas of praxis that need addressing when we address feminist futures.

Bridging difference – Despite many struggles, we have still not been able to bridge the differences among us. When we examine the geographies of exclusion we are simultaneously examining the politics of inclusion. In today's globalised world, the needs of metropolitan centres attract populations to it, but also contain and shape this inclusion. Women from all over the world are travelling to distant and terrifying landscapes, escaping from other frightening locations – as domestic and sex workers, as brides and prostitutes, as factory workers without any rights. The ghettos of subalterneity that emerge in metropolitan centres tell us about both, the expanded needs of the gendered metropolitan power and its servicing by the subaltern other. And yet, the flourishings in the ghettos of the excluded do challenge as well as serve the needs of the metropolis. The question then, following Spivak, is not only 'can the subaltern speak', but also 'can the metropolis hear'?

Can feminist futures be unmarked by the internal critique of feminism? These internal struggles have been critical in creating frames within which we understand equality and inequality, difference and universalism and negotiate our everyday political practices. These struggles have been both discursive and material – we are now speaking of future in the

plural, after all. From working class women's challenges to 'global feminism' in the 1970s, to the 'cultural' difference debates of the 1990s, difference had vexed feminist theory and practice in productive and less fruitful ways. While the earlier optimistic readings of women's solidarity had folded in differences among them, the cultural turn of the 1990s, many have argued led to a cultural relativism – a 'hands off' approach to culture and equality which meant that most dialogue across cultural boundaries ceased to animate feminist work. As a result, while some still continue to speak in universal modes, others are identified as 'internal others' who speak for those not seen or heard – who substitute for those who are absent, as Anne Phillips has noted. She also points out that this "persistent under-representation of women in most of the forums in which these issues are addressed then emerges as a particularly pressing problem²."

I can vouch for this hesitancy that emerges from a feeling of being always in the 'wrong place' or the perpetual state of otherness. When writing or speaking of 'honour crimes' in India and Pakistan for example, I have felt worried about the reading my work will generate in those outside the cultural boundaries within which this crime takes place, while at the same time recognising the importance of breaking the codes of silence that racism imposes, something that most people of colour experience. We have not yet been able to develop the vocabularies that would allow us to speak across these borders of 'universalism and substitutionism', or representation and re-presentation – whether on grounds of dis/ability, sexuality or race. Often, as Geeta Chowdhury and I have pointed out, the 'hearing' of postcolonial voices that focus on race often takes the form of illustrative engagements leading to museum like displays of the exoticised other – teaching us about civilizations declined, peripheral but colourful examples of weakness in one or other form. These

² Multiculturalism, Universalism and the Claims of Democracy, Anne Phillips, Democracy, Governance and Human Rights Programme Paper Number 7 December 2001, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

erasures of race and culture in the stories of feminist theory are made possible through a series of ontological and epistemological manoeuvres. These manoeuvres structure the emergence of a "common sense" regarding the boundaries of the known and knowable. This common sense can only be transformed through dialogue – with the other – but, to echo Chandra Mohanty, not giving over agency of interpretation to those with power; and not by category-based representation of the 'others' while we insist on the self-representation of some. That several decades of struggle have not provided us with new ways of communication, dialogue and bridging, is surely dispiriting – but is it surprising? The structure-agency problem takes a different form here – one that continues to haunt feminist praxis.

Bridging theory and practice – starting from a position where feminism and transformation of social relations were inextricably tied, we now approach the world out there often as an object of study rather than as a social space that we all inhabit. While in the 1970s and the 1980s feminists worried about being coopted by the state if they engaged with structures of power, the 1990s saw a reversal of this position – feminist engagement became increasingly part of the institutional fold. Whether it was NGOs or the state in its different forms – women's machineries for example – or indeed international political and economic institutions such as the UN or the World Bank, we engaged with all these. If the vocabularies of difference kept us apart, then the learning of the vocabularies of power also posed questions for us. What is also worrying is that the language of politics is transforming into the language of expertise – feminist theorisation and empirical research are becoming fodder for reports, governmental and non-governmental; the distance that such research demands is creating new silences. Expertise, while generating a demand for feminist research, is also creating some roadblocks on the way to interdisciplinary and creative politics on the ground.

Take for example, the current economic crisis. Feminist economists have theorised about women's work and about their contribution to national economies. Non-governmental organisations have challenged, with the help of feminist economists and lawyers, the unequal impact of governmental policies on the everyday lives of women – in courts. And what about the virtual world – is there not the tweet, facebook, blogging and myriad other

ways of communicating, organising and challenging gendered inequalities? This form of communication, one could argue, bridges the North/South gap. We look in hope to the Arab Spring for evidence of the ways in which democratic aspirations are finding new forms of articulations. I am a postblog generation, and yet, research has and is showing that blogs continue to reproduce conventional attitudes to gender relations³ – and as reports suggest already, the Arab Spring is not bringing a thaw in these ossified relations. Am I on the road to nostalgia-land? Of sepia images of women chained to the House of Commons, of burning the bra and loud demonstrations in the streets to claim the night for women? Perhaps. The Indian women's movement emerged out of the extraordinary political mobilisation against the rape of a young tribal woman called Mathura by two policemen in a police station and against the Supreme Court that acquitted them. This movement was supported by a group of lawyers writing a stringent critique of the case and pointing to the structural inequalities that framed it – rape, as Pratiksha Baxi has pointed out, came to be defined through this mobilisation on and off the streets, as an act of power, through which patriarchy is reproduced (2011). Recovering that history of activism, of bridging the gap that has emerged between activism and theorisation, creating new forms of activism just as we theorise in more creative ways, all form part of praxis of the future that we need to aspire to.

Bridging Past and Present – finally, I want to end by briefly mentioning another bridging that we need. The Shona saying goes 'paths are made from walking'. As feminists we are also walking on paths made from feet that struggled to forge new directions. That these paths are not smooth, have led us into cul-de-sacs on occasions and have been rather rough at times does not of course mean that we reject them, forget them or refuse to recognise their importance. As I have argued, we continue to reshape these paths to freedom. However, I worry about what I would call the bane of 'presentism' that is evident in our critiques; I worry that we continue to focus on the present at the expense of our past struggles, that by insisting that all phenomena and events ought to be seen in reference to the present gives a normative priority to the present and the past is seen as something to be progressively

³ Chesher, C., Blogs and the Crisis of Authorship, Paper presented in 2005 at Blogtalk

overcome. Losing our histories can only be a delegitimization and disempowering of ourselves.

Raising this question in the academy is in itself critical – what we teach, how we teach and who teaches are all questions that need repeated airing, just as the questions about who we cite and who we don't, where we cite and whose work we engage. The issue of structure and agency that I have been wrestling with continues to dog our collective footsteps. If we accept the power of the metropolis as shaping our lives, then our alternative visions will continue to reflect that power despite the challenges that our historical collective struggles pose. These alternative visions provide a promise of empowerment, through ambiguity rather than certainties; through our struggles to create new spaces where we (as well as them) can, as RJB Walker has called it, think 'other-wise'; where there is a proliferation of many voices rather than a few and where we continue to create knowledge as we resist by avoiding 'paradigmatic conceit'ⁱ We do this because we crave not only interpretative autonomy but also a transformative politics that address both the exclusions and terms of inclusion in the metropolitan centres of power. What continues to unfold, therefore, is not only consolidating power of the metropolis, but also the challenges posed by women and men seeking to transform the world that they inhabit. In conclusion, feminist futures are, of course, what we will make of them – individually and collectively, discursively and materially, framed by relations of power that shape us as well as disturb us and motivate us to act. I do not despair; I hope – but I do this with deep caution. Thank you.

ⁱ Reading Dissidence/Writing the Discipline: Crisis and the Question of Sovereignty in International Studies, ISQ 34(1990).