

# Crossborder Feminisms

## Wendy Harcourt in Conversation with Srilatha Batliwala, Sunila Abeysekera and Rawwida Baksh

WENDY HARCOURT

**ABSTRACT** *Wendy Harcourt interviews three feminist activists who have been engaged in feminist action from the grassroots to transnational levels. They reflect on changes in feminist and women's movement organizing, both in terms of what are the new issues emerging today and what feminist organizing has given to transformational movement building.*

**KEYWORDS** *activism; grassroots; women's movement; sexuality; genealogy; transnational feminism*

### **Grassroots global civic action/Interview with Srilatha Batliwala**

*Srilatha Batliwala, feminist scholar and activist, discusses issues of representation with transnational civil society, particularly in relation to the rise of transnational grassroots movements with a strong constituency base and sophisticated advocacy capability at both local and global levels.*

**WH:** How do you understand global civic action today?

**SB:** I would say there is now an entirely new set of social movements, networks and organizations that are emerging at the transnational level. But I would avoid lumping them into something called global civil society. Rather, there is a global civic space forming as part of what we call globalization.



**WH:** Why would you say this civic space has emerged?

**SB:** There have been several catalysts: one was the 'Conference Decade' of the 1990s, which affirmed the right of civic society or non-governmental actors to participate in shaping national and global policies on the environment, population, human rights, economic development and women.

Then the growth of the global market fuelled a further expansion, as global civil society tried to hold global institutions accountable to citizens. In

addition, there are the possibilities unleashed by new information and communication technologies. These communication networks have allowed individuals and organizations to exchange information, create transnational alliances and respond to new challenges and developments with great ease.

**WH:** What about grassroots transnational movements?

**SB:** Let me first comment on the term itself. The concept of 'grassroots' used to refer to small rural communities or urban neighbourhoods – in fact, it was usually applied to rural, village-level communities rather than to urban ones. But with globalization, grassroots means something else, something quite divorced from the degree of vulnerability to global policy and economic shifts. This broadening of the term grassroots and grassroots movements disguises the differences between movements of directly affected peoples and those of their champions, spokespeople or advocates, especially in terms of power, resources, visibility, access, voice and influence.

**WH:** What does this imply for our understanding then of global civic action?

**SB:** We need to rebuild our definitions and theories of social movements to address not only transnational movements, but also cross-border grassroots movements. There is a need to build new frameworks out of the experience of the range of global movements that emerged in the past 20 years, and given the growing phenomenon of grassroots-based movements. It is important to consider the causal, structural and strategic distinctions between grassroots movements (such as of the urban poor, home-based workers, poor rural women, indigenous peoples) and other types of movements (e.g., the land mines campaign, anti-globalization, the Occupy movement); the new forms of homogeneity and heterogeneity that coexist within movements (e.g., geographically and culturally dispersed groups like slum dwellers or indigenous peoples forming associations and new identities across borders); the differences in organizing and advocacy strategies between domestic (Chiapas) and transnational (land mines or freedom from

debt) movements; characteristics of short-term (campaigns against nuclear installations) and long-term struggles for change (disarmament, rights of informal sector workers) and between single-issue (reproductive rights) *versus* more broad-based transformation-type movements (anti-globalization/Occupy/Indignados); and the phenomenon of participation in multiple movements – that is, the fluidity and mobility that makes the boundaries between movements more porous than in the past.

**WH:** Do you see a struggle between grassroots movements and other social movements?

**SB:** Grassroots movements are challenging the rights of non-grassroots organizations to lead and represent them, especially in the public policy arena, at both national and international levels. By grassroots movements I am referring to constituency-based movements like the home-based workers, child workers, self-employed women, small and marginal farmers, fish workers, shack/slum dwellers, indigenous peoples, dalits and other racially, ethnically or religiously based associations. They are critically questioning the right and need to have their issues and concerns represented by others. Their analyses, strategies and tactics often differ radically from those of the usual global actors – some could be far more militant (such as Latin American peasant movements or the Narmada Bachao Andolan in India), and others far more pragmatic and less 'ideological' (such as the home-based workers and slum dwellers) than their counterparts would like.

These transnational grassroots movements are an emerging force in the global arena. Other transnational civil society actors – particularly those involved in global and regional policy advocacy – must consider the implications of these grassroots movements for their own strategies. It is vital that all civil society organizations and networks engaged in both local advocacy and global advocacy build strong and accountable relationships with grassroots constituencies – and with grassroots organizations and movements wherever they do exist.

To quote from an article I wrote ten years ago (Batliwala, 2002), Sundaramma, a grassroots 191

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women's leader, told me that to empower the voices of the poor in policymaking, outside activists must reposition their leadership roles over time. She said, 'In the beginning, you may walk in front of us. After a while, as we

grow stronger, you must walk beside us. But finally, you must learn to walk behind us'.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, there are a growing number of transnational grassroots movements that are already walking in front.

### Note

1 Personal communication with Sundaramma, Mahila Samakhya Sangha (women's collective) leader of Bagdal village, Bidar District, Karnataka State in South India, in February 1991.

### Reference

Batliwala, Srilatha (2002) 'Grassroots Movements as Transnational Actors: Implications for global civil society 2002', *Voluntas* 13(4).

## Feminist and Women's Movements in Asia/Interview with Sunila Abeysekera

*Sunila Abeysekera is an award winning human rights activist from Sri Lanka and is currently visiting fellow at the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University, The Hague.*

**WH:** How would you define the difference between women's movements and feminist movements?

**SA:** In my experience, women who are part of women's movements, for example, working to end violence against women, take as their primary political entry point the fact that they are women. Their assumption is that as women they understand the problems that women face and women should organize and mobilize to overcome those challenges and difficulties.

Feminists instead come to political organizing with an analysis of power relations, and a critique of male power and patriarchy including a critique of heteronormativity. In my experience many women's movement activists find it difficult to accept a feminist analysis of gender power relations, not only in their analysis of oppression but also in their personal life and behavior.

Feminists work from a 'personal is political' standpoint so that you live by what you believe in. Such a strong position is difficult for many women's movement organizers to adopt, particularly when it comes to their lifestyles. They do not want to turn their lives upside down. They may wish to



work for women's rights in poor communities, for example, but they will keep their own lives the same. They don't want to challenge male power in their own households, or in partner organizations. They will state baldly that women are their own worst enemies, and leave it at that. What feminists instead will say is that women are their own worst enemies because society and men have told them that is the case, they live it out. Feminists will challenge it, not by blaming women but by trying to change the institutions and perspectives that set women against women.

**WH:** What about younger women in Sri Lanka or Asian context, do they see themselves as feminists?

**SA:** I see very few young women identifying as feminists. With the new virtual forms of organizing I see how there is little sense nowadays of the need for 'women only' spaces. For example, when organizing among social media, they do not see it as an issue if it is a man or a woman blogging or tweeting.

**WH:** Do you see different movement organizing then due to social media? How do you see the events of 2011?

**SA:** Yes I see a very different world of movement organizing emerging in 2011. This world of social media is very challenging to the older generation of feminists as people organize and communicate through Facebook, Twitter and blogs. For me it is another world. I see younger men and women activists use all sort of technologies to discuss and analyze transnational events, create discussions about what is happening and use that knowledge to mobilize, as in Egypt. Social media was critical for the Arab Revolution in order to get information out – look at Syria now and Iran two years ago, we only know what is happening because of mobile phones and Internet communication.

This way of communicating and organization is generational. I have a camera on my mobile but I don't know how to upload a photo on my computer and send it to others. New generations are technologically in tune with modernity. It is very important and innovative to look at groups like Avaaz and see how they did absolutely critical social justice organizing and mobilizing. I feel the new technologies enable brilliant communication, but for me the virtual world is still not the same as the real world.

**WH:** So how would describe then the real world for feminist organizing?

**SA:** If you look back over 20 years of feminist organizing in Asia, one of the most fascinating things is that in different countries you see the feminist influence on women's movements. Feminism really only came into being in our part of the world in the late 1980s, and 1990s.

The key issues that emerged strongly because of this interaction among feminists and women's

movements was the work around abortion, reproductive and sexual health, reproductive rights and sexual rights and then the evolution of these various strands of discussion about women's right to choose into the broader framework of sexual rights. The most consistent interplay I have seen in Asia, substantively and practically, between women's movements and feminists is with women who do human rights work.

I am amused when I hear a women's rights worker say I am not a feminist, when in fact through their work they do challenge male control and patriarchy but they do not like to see themselves as feminist. I think the stereotype of feminists in the 1960s as 'home breakers' and 'trouble makers' remains in Asia.

**WH:** How are feminists organizing now in Asia?

**SA:** There have been interesting developments. In 2009, South Asian feminists came out with a South Asian Feminist Declaration that developed the dream of a People's union of South Asia. In 2011, a group of Asian women activists came together in Chiang Mai to hold an Asian feminist forum. The lead was taken by the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development that emerged out of the Nairobi Conference on Women in 1985.

Asian feminists have always looked with admiration (and some envy) at the vibrant Latin American Feminist Encuentros and the success of the African Feminist Forums. The Asian Forum was small but a great achievement given today's troubled climate. In Malaysia, for example, in the past, women had organized an event they called Fiesta Feminista, but in 2011, they were prevented from organizing it. Feminists and women's movements are feeling the pressure of fundamentalism of all kinds now: religious, cultural combined with extreme nationalisms.

However small, holding the Asia Feminist Forum was important. It brought together feminists who need the space to speak as feminists and to analyze together emerging economic and political events and trends in the region and in the world that have a critical impact on women. Among the key areas of discussion were: the emerging challenges posed to women's freedom and equality by the forces of extreme nationalisms

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and fundamentalisms of all kinds. Within that discussion on fundamentalism, there is an interesting dynamic or maybe we should say dilemma between secular feminists and faith-based feminists, for want of a better world! In the Asian region, these differences can at times be put aside as women talk together to understand the violence, war and conflict in all our societies. Particularly concerning was how to understand the strong role of women in right wing and fundamentalist movements in India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan, for example.

A second critical strand for discussion among Asian feminists was the issue of rural women. A large part of the population in the Asian region is still agricultural. Their livelihoods are under threat by processes of change led by transnational agribusiness. Land rights for women continue to be important. Since Beijing, women's rights to own and control property has been a major issue for us. We argued that women should have title or joint title to land or property so that if they were abandoned by their husbands they still would have access to resources. The push for the state to grant land rights to women has however now created a situation in which small farmers including women are losing their land as they sell their rights and are then dispossessed by big companies. The question now is about how to sustain collective rights of communities to land, how [to] develop a feminist approach to sustainable development, how to retain organic and traditional farming practices, how to create a campaign that goes beyond just land rights. In 2009, La Via Campesina held their annual meeting in Indonesia; we can see the emerging influence of their approach to women's leadership in the rural and agricultural sectors.

The third strand of discussion focuses on reproductive rights, sexual rights and about sexualities. A discussion about the links between hetero-normativity and patriarchy is emerging. Some of the barriers to talking about sexuality are breaking down. In Asia, there are

so many cultural and social barriers to speaking about sexualities. The broader women's movement still retains a silence around issues of lesbian and bisexual women as well as transpersons. Lesbians are expected to join in the struggles of the feminist movement, but feminists are not always that forthcoming to defend the rights of lesbians.

**WH:** How do you see the intersection between human rights and women's rights movements in Asia?

**SA:** There is now a shift in how women are engaging in human rights for gender justice. Earlier the women who connected to human rights were working on SRHR and VAW, but in the past ten years more women are in movements that are fighting for land rights, for rights of indigenous communities and on environmental issues. In these mixed movements, they are facing many challenges to their leadership from male colleagues, and are beginning to think through gender power dynamics. It is reminiscent of what happened to women in socialist and communist parties in the 1960s and 1970s where women had to fight to claim their space. Socialist feminism emerged from that struggle. Today, I observe women who are working with the urban poor, for example, beginning to understand that you need to claim rights as women, and that the politics of poverty and social justice do not always take up women's rights.

There has always been critique about human rights, especially since it so often portrayed as an international legal system, which is so far away from our realities. We need to use that system when we can. But for me, more importantly, human rights and feminism are more about principles and about a way of life. It is about how one interacts with people, how one struggles to change unequal power relations. Both human rights and feminism provide an ethical framework based on universality, equality and the interdependence of rights, of civil and political and of economic social and cultural rights.

## Transnational feminisms/Interview with Rawwida Baksh

*Rawwida Baksh is feminist scholar and activist who has recently returned to live and work in the Caribbean after many years of working in international organizations based in the UK and Canada.*

**WH:** We are, together with several others, starting work on a genealogy of transnational feminist movements, can you outline the aims of the project?

**RB:** Starting with an OUPA handbook to be published in 2013 and I hope later we can embark on an encyclopaedic project that can go into much greater detail, we are setting out to look at the historical, political and economic contexts in which transnational feminist movements have emerged and developed.<sup>1</sup>

We want to record the contributions made by transnational feminist movements to global knowledge, policy and social change in the 50 or so years from the 1970s to the 2010s. The idea is that collectively we produce a major resource that will illustrate how the theory and practice of feminist movements have both transformed international development policy and academic disciplines, contributing new knowledge, policy and social transformation.

**WH:** On what levels [do] you see transnational feminist activism operating?

**RB:** We are aiming to examine feminist movements on three levels. The first is the intergovernmental policy level linked to advocacy around the UN global conferences where feminists have advocated for change. We see the series of UN global conferences held in the 1990s with their accompanying NGO forums and funding as providing a particular impetus for transnational feminist organizing and politics.

The second level is the transnational networking across regional and national borders in solidarity with and support for grassroots/community organizing towards specific feminist goals. All of these experiences have made important contributions and changes to our ways of thinking about health, education, care and work, the economy, land rights, violence, peace and conflict, political participation, leadership and governance, among others.



And the third level is the intersectional networking and movement building for women's rights and gender justice within broader global movements organizing for human rights, political and economic transformation. Here gender and social movements have had a stormy but important engagement in movement politics and culture, for example, in the global justice movement and the World Social Forum that have led to major shifts in peoples' organizing, engagement in politics and social change.

**WH:** What are some of the themes the project will address?

**RB:** For now, beginning with the Handbook we are covering nine main themes that have emerged from feminist and women's rights movements: organizing for change; body politics, health and wellbeing; human rights and gender justice; economic and social justice; citizenship, democracy and governance; conflict, militarism and peace building; secularism and religious fundamentalisms; feminist political ecology; and information and communications technologies.

**WH:** What particular issues are you personally engaged in?

**RB:** Over all, I am very interested in understanding power within feminist practice, movement-building processes, strategies employed

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including qualitative research/action methodologies. Another of my specific interests is in human rights and gender justice. For example, I think we need to record how transnational feminist movements have articulated women's rights as a foundational agenda for achieving gender equality. The 1979 UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is a comprehensive bill of rights for women, won through women's struggles. Ratified by 187 States parties to date, it has formed the basis for national legislation to enable women to enjoy and exercise all human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural and other spheres based on the principles of non-discrimination and equality with men. The UN CEDAW Committee meets annually to assess reports presented by governments on their implementation of the Convention. The transnational feminist movement made a further leap forward in achieving agreement on 'women's rights as human rights' at the UN global conference on human rights held in Vienna in 1993. I am interested in bringing a critical perspective to the achievement of women's human rights and gender justice in areas including CEDAW implementation; gender, law and culture; gender-based violence; land rights; and trafficking in women.

**WH:** Another strongly related area is citizenship, leadership, democracy and governance. How is the Handbook looking at this field?

**RB:** Women's active citizenship and political participation are today recognized internationally as a key element in building genuine democracy and fostering social progress. The call for greater numbers of women leaders in politics and governance stems from an understanding that women's equal participation is not only a fundamental human right, but also contributes to sustainable development. Women's achievement of 30 percent of seats in national parliaments (or a 'critical mass') has been specified in the Beijing Platform for Action and Millennium Development Goals as an indicator of progress towards women's empowerment and gender equality.

196 Srilatha Batliwala has argued that leadership 'is a means, not an end. We build leadership skills and

capacity for something, to do something, to change something, and not because leadership is a service or product for consumption'. She views feminist leadership as 'not merely capacitating more women to play leadership roles, but to lead differently, with feminist values', and to 'advance the agenda of social transformation in a way that other forms of leadership do not and cannot', thus 'enabling us to build feminist leadership capacity in non-feminist women and men'. (Batliwala, 2010)

The transnational struggles for women's full and equal citizenship, political representation and transformational leadership have pushed for women's participation in democratic and governance institutions and processes that are inclusive, accountable and promote gender-aware policy. We hope that the essays in this section will critically examine the feminist movements' contribution to the debates on citizenship, leadership, democracy and governance at all three levels where they have created possibilities for change. An analysis of women's engagement in the current democratization movements in the Arab world (the so-called 'Arab spring') would be of keen interest to readers.

**WH:** What about peace and conflict area? I believe you have done quite a bit of work in that area.

**RB:** Yes, that is another of my interests. Feminists have argued for gender justice in the entire spectrum of peace initiatives including: conflict prevention; peace negotiations and agreements; peacekeeping, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration; truth and reconciliation processes; post-conflict reconstruction; peace building and peace education. Transnational feminist movements have targeted the UN Security Council as a key forum for articulating the impact of war and conflict on women, and their active contribution to peace processes. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security called for 'the equal participation and full involvement of women in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security', and emphasized 'the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution'. Subsequent UN Security Council Resolutions 1820 and 1888 have further advanced this agenda.

It is important to trace women's experiences of conflict and militarism, and their contribution to peace-building processes. We hope to be looking at the definition of rape in war as a crime against humanity by the International Criminal Court, women's struggles for inclusion in peace negotiations and agreements, the work of international agencies in support of grassroots women in various wars and conflicts, the complex issues and contradictions around women in the military (most recently evident in the atrocities by the US military against Iraqi prisoners of war at Abu Ghraib prison), the narratives on the United Nation's Security Council Resolutions 1325, 1820 and 1888 as strategies for a meaningful and sustainable peace.

**WH:** Lastly, what about secularisms and religious fundamentalisms, which is emerging as a major concern in feminist organizing now?

**RB:** Yes we are certainly looking at fundamentalism in every region and religion. Christian

fundamentalisms have targeted women's sexual and reproductive rights, and feminists' continuing struggle with the Church and state in countries across the developing South is around the right to sex education and contraception, and the legalisation of abortion. Islamic fundamentalisms, particularly as expressed through repressive interpretations of Sharia law, have a discriminatory impact on women's bodies, rights, identity and status. Norani Othman summed it up in her statement that 'the control of women, their social roles, movements and sexuality form the core of the Islamic fundamentalist's view of gender roles and relations'. (Othman, 2006) Discrimination against women spans areas as diverse as the imposition of the veil, female circumcision, forced marriage, unequal opportunities for education and employment, lack of access to divorce and child custody, and honour killings. I see this as a major contribution of feminism to thinking about rights.

### Note

- 1 The Handbook is *The Oxford Handbook of Transnational Feminist Movements* to be published by Oxford University Press America edited Rawwida Baksh and Wendy Harcourt.

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