Transnational Feminisms, Depoliticization, International Development: What does it mean to Listen to Third World Women?

The objective is to generate a debate on development, its impact and efficaciousness for women in Third World contexts, and the promise and pitfall of transnational feminisms in this regard. The 2012 World Development Report points out what many feminists around the world have been saying for more than two decades now: women’s increased incorporation into economic structures has not translated into a better quality of life or even a better chance at just staying alive for millions of girls and women in so-called developing countries. This panel aims to address what the report alludes to as “stubborn gender gaps” not just in a bid to critique the narrow economic focus that elides the question of how multi-layered power relations ranging from the global to the national to the local and the familial create the circumstances for women’s oppression/marginalization and advancement/development, but also to examine how the co-optation or misuse of certain strands of feminist thought created the paradigm that has led to the entrenchment, and, in certain cases and countries, even deterioration of women’s conditions and realities. Part of the project is to also interrogate why existing feminist frameworks and research that do highlight the imperative to locate economic perspectives within the nexus of the multi-layered micro-macro contexts circumscribing women’s lives have been sidelined or not looked at within policy contexts nationally and internationally. How do feminists, women’s rights activists, and human rights workers remain complicit in both the pushing forward of a limited and distorted understanding of women’s issues and the pushing aside of more complex analyses grounded in women’s lives, that might be seen as too threatening or irrelevant by policy-makers? We are especially interested in raising such questions both with respect to women in contexts of extreme deprivation, including those of armed conflict, and in relation to women, such as elected representatives, who are seen as the most powerful women in their countries. What structures and belief systems have blocked the realization of women’s potential in such a wide array of contexts, and what can be done at grassroots, advocacy, and policy levels to attenuate the effects of these blocks, if we cannot remove them altogether?

The panel will consist of four presentations based on data collected in four sites: NGOs in Palestine; women in Afghanistan; women and girls in Swat Valley; and, Pakistani women parliamentarians. The starting points for each paper are the women we worked with and interviewed. While our focus remains on women’s voices and perspectives, the emphasis is on women as knowledge producers, not merely as consumers of development or the desirers of modernity. We problematicize the idea of “voice” as transparent and literal, and underscore how women’s words are embedded in their particular realities and situations. We will illustrate how donor agencies and mainstream knowledge production about development and development in practice do women and the larger politics of women’s empowerment a disservice by “listening” to only selected voices, leading to false conceptions of women’s agency and misplaced interventions after taking into account those conceptions. Each presentation ends with suggestions for advocacy and policy strategies, taking into account the original impulse of transnational feminisms in particular, before it got swept away by the 1980s United Nations bid to “gender” development. How can we recuperate transnational feminist thought with its emphasis on solidarity, its faith on using the linkages between micro level grassroots activities and macro-level networks to create more possibilities for women? How will such a cohesive transnational feminist collectivity help our insights to more effectively impact policy and international development in a more consistent and expansive fashion?

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