

Local Activisms, Global Feminisms and the

BY ANGELA MILES

L'auteure insiste sur le besoin de promouvoir chez toutes les militantes, les impératifs de changement qui assurent la solidarité féministe et elle ajoute que seuls les féminismes qui défient le système dans son ensemble peuvent attiser les intérêts communs des femmes pour un changement, assurer une base de solidarité pour les femmes du Canada et d'ailleurs dans le monde quelle que soit la classe ou l'éthnie et enfin des féminismes qui peuvent jouer un rôle dans le monde exaltant et multiforme des femmes à l'échelle mondiale

Feminist internationalism

Feminism is necessarily an internationalist politics, for the systems of exploitation and control we resist are global. In North America we understood right from the beginning of this phase of feminist activism that "No woman is free until all women are free."¹ It is now becoming increasingly clear that the liberation of any community of women requires women's liberation in all communities. To win our full freedom, and not merely ameliorate women's conditions, we will have to transform global as well as national and local structures of power.

Women's struggle has a long history in all regions of the world. In the current period feminists everywhere have discovered and reclaimed largely hidden histories of women's resistance. In the West we discovered Christine de Pisan from the fifteenth century, Mary Wollstonecraft from the eighteenth, and Sojourner Truth from the nineteenth.

Leadership at the international level has tended to come from the economic South where women have been more aware of the importance of global solidarity.

We learned that the suffragists were a mass movement of militant and visionary women, not a tiny group of laughable malcontents as we'd been told; that, in Canada women were recognized as people in law as late as 1920 only after a long struggle. Asian feminists point to Buddha's debate with his followers in the sixth century about whether women could join the order and become nuns and to women's campaigns for emancipation linked with struggles against foreign domination and local despotism in the nineteenth and twentieth century (Bhasin and Khan; Jayawardena).

African feminists point to "the key role [of women] in traditional African Society ... which still prevails in many African regions (e.g. in the Akan region, in the South-East of the Ivory coast, in Togo, in Senegal etc ...)" and to "the traditions of struggle" in "Egypt, Sudan, Lebanon, Maghreb" where this was not the case (Baffoun 4).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries activist women worked together across boundaries of nation, class, race, and culture in numerous international networks and conferences against slavery and war and for women's rights (Stienstra). Though not as narrow as commonly believed, participation in these organizations and events was predominantly European, Scandinavian, North American, Anzac, and Latin American. Even this geographically limited solidarity supported women's struggles in significant ways in each of their home nations while providing a powerful base for women trying to change the world.

International feminist cooperation today is important for the same reasons. However, it is qualitatively different in scope and potential, grounded in and reflecting for the first time a genuinely global mass movement of women. Participants in these new international networks and conferences come from all regions of the world. Unlike the earlier period, leadership at the international level has tended to come from the economic South where women have been more and longer aware of global systems of power and the importance of global solidarity.

All over the world women are engaged in feminist environmental, economic, health, shelter, food security, social-justice, human rights, peace, anti-debt, anti-globalization, pro-democracy, anti-violence, and anti-fundamentalist struggles of major proportions (Brodrigg; Davies 1983, 1986; Morgan; Schuler 1986, 1990, 1992; Wine and Ristock). These activists are cooperating globally to develop analysis and strategy, and to support local and international action through newsletters, conferences, workshops, courses, and joint lobbying efforts at the United Nations (UN), and other international agencies. And they are creating new forms of ongoing dialogue and organization in loose, decentralized networks very different from women's earlier international associations which tended to be based on formal national groups. These new feminist networks are founded whenever a need is felt for global cooperation. So they are more numerous and flexible with generally closer ties to local activism and more opportunity for direct exchange and mutual learn-

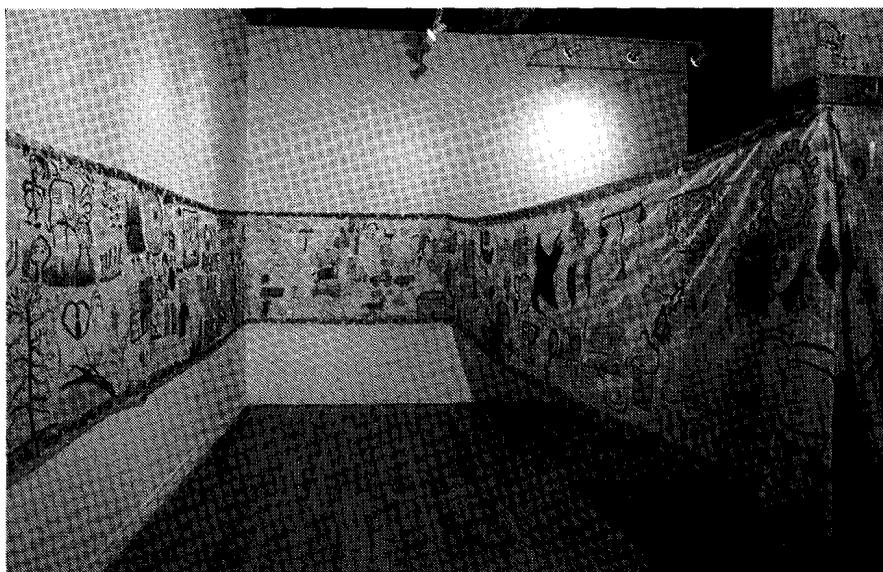
Struggle Against Globalization

ing among women in very different situations and struggles.

International issue-defined feminist networks include (to name only a few of many) The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), the Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering (FINRRAGE), The International Commission for the Abolition of Sexual Mutilation (female genital mutilation), The International Women and Health Network, Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights, Women Against Fundamentalism, and Women's Rights are Human Rights Network.

Many regional networks and identity-based international networks are also making major contributions to the development of broad and inclusive feminist politics. These more general networks foster dialogue, research, theory building and activism across issue areas and among issue-defined networks. Such Regional networks include the Association of African Women on Research and Development (AAWORD), the Asian and Pacific Women's Action and Research Network (AWRAN), and the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA). Among the myriad of international identity based networks are the well known Network of Women Living under Muslim Laws, Third World Women's Network, Indigenous Women's Network, and the DisAbled Women's Network.

All these varied networks produce newsletters and organize regular conferences. They are also sustained by and in turn sustain multi-faceted feminist journals and conferences which foster dialogue and organizing among feminist individuals and groups all over the world working on the whole gamut of issues. Examples of such broad international feminist journals are *WIN News*, *WE International*, *Connexions*, and *Lola Press* (in this latter journal all the articles appear in English, French, and Spanish). Important broad international feminist conferences include the four United Nations Congresses on Women held in 1975, 1980, 1985, and 1995 with growing numbers and diversity of women and ever increasing



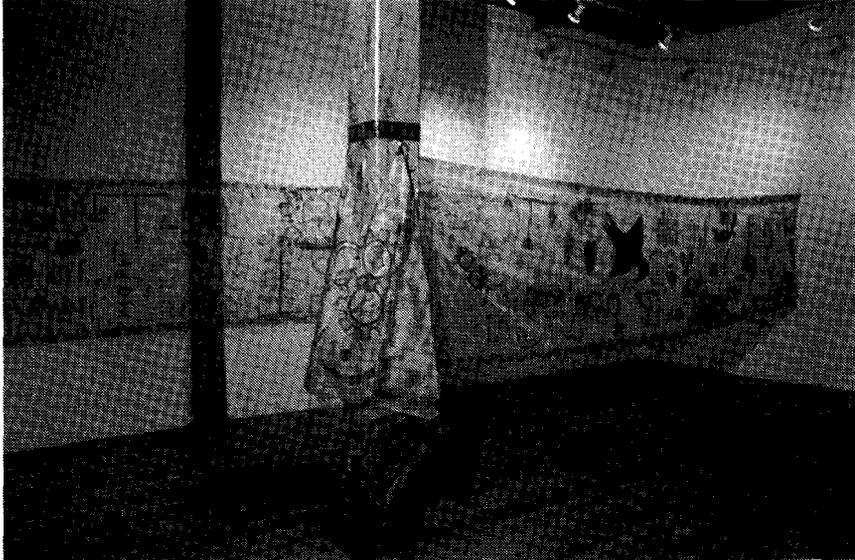
Detail, "Women's Rights are Human Rights," Summer 2000. Banner created by a number of Irish community groups in collaboration with Toronto-based artist, Rochelle Rubinstein. Photo: Tom Moore.

leadership from the "two thirds world"; the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet in 1991; the International Interdisciplinary Congress of Women held every three years in a different city since its inception in 1981 in Haifa, Israel; and the biennial Conferences of the Association for Women in Development (AWID) (United States-based but increasingly international and movement defined). Women's intensive organizing around United Nations Conferences on the Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992, Human Rights in 1993, Population in 1994, and Social Development in 1995 and their preparatory and follow up meetings has also benefitted significantly from—and helped build—the global capacity of feminism.

Feminist local globalism

Feminists' ability to act together at the global level, as reflected in these international journals, conferences, and networks, is extremely important. However, it is only one facet of global feminist movement which is made up of a multitude of globally aware local feminisms.

The inspiring "World March of Women in the Year 2000,"² an entirely new form of international cooperation grounded directly in these local feminisms, testifies powerfully to their vigor and scope and growing global aware-



Detail, "Women's Rights are Human Rights," Summer 2000. Banner created by a number of Irish community groups in collaboration with Toronto-based artist, Rochelle Rubinstein. Photo: Tom Moore.

ness. The March was the idea of Quebec feminists inspired by the success of their ten-day 1995 provincial March "Du pains et des roses" ("Bread and Roses) against poverty and violence against women.

Beginning at the Fourth World Women's Congress in Beijing in 1995, they called on women's groups around the world to participate by organizing local events related to these themes in their own country beginning on March 8, 2000 (International Women's Day) and ending on October 17, 2000, this day to be marked with national marches in all the countries with national coordinating committees and an international March on the United Nations in New York City.

This massive global initiative draws on women's political strengths in 157 countries (August 2000 count) at both the local and global levels and highlights their connection. Participating groups are experiencing themselves and are revealed to each other as unique centres of diverse practice in a multi-centred global movement. The March honours and nourishes global feminism's local roots and women's growing capacity to work together. In doing so it heralds a new level of feminist movement in which any one of its many centres can invoke the power of global solidarity.

Transformative feminisms

In Canada one of our main challenges today must be to foster in our local and global activism the transformative perspectives that are necessary underpinnings of feminist solidarity. Women, as individuals and members of diverse groups, are located very differently, often in antagonistic relation to each other within their local communities and the world system. Our immediate needs, interests, and

strategic priorities vary greatly. Only feminisms which challenge the system as a whole can reveal women's common interests in change; provide a basis for solidarity among women of all races, classes, and regions in Canada and globally; and play a role in the vibrant multi-centred global feminist movement.

These transformative feminisms address the whole of society from women's points of view, not just "women's issues." They question not only women's inequality *within* current social structures but the structures themselves; and they resist colonial, race, and capitalist as well as patriarchal power at the local and global level (Bunch; Miles 1996).³

Key to these transformative perspectives is an understanding that the unequal, competitive, individualistic, market relations that define this system were established historically through the conquest and control of nature, women, workers, and traditional cultures and communities in both "first and two-thirds world." (Mies).⁴ The "globalization" we hear so much about today is a continuation and intensification of these destructive processes.

In the industrial nations of the economic North, we are taught on the contrary, that "modernization," "development," and "globalization" represent unambiguous and benign "progress." Ever since the end of the Second World War when all nations began to keep national income accounts, a country's GDP (Gross Domestic Product—value of market transactions) has been used as a measure of its wealth and well-being (Waring). Growth in GDP and thus the opportunity for profit has become the policy priority of all national governments and development agencies as well as transnational corporations. Yet neoliberal agendas to maximize the growth of GDP, including privatization, devaluation, cuts to social welfare, downsizing and wage reductions have huge costs for people everywhere and the planet. (Douthwaite, Shiva).

Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) enforcing this agenda have long been imposed on countries of the economic south by the G7 countries and multi-lateral agencies like the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Their populations have been resisting for decades. Now, we in the industrialized nations are suffering the same agenda in the "restructuring" imposed by our own governments and are joining the resistance. (Isla, Miles and Molloy, Sen and Grown; Ricciutelli *et al.*; Sparr).

Anti-globalization movement

Farmers, fishers, peasants, workers, young people, envi-

ronmentalists, and indigenous peoples, as well as feminists, all over the world are working in their own contexts to end cutbacks, privatization, environmental destruction, corruption, dictatorship, militarism, and violence. And they are working together internationally to counter the draconian undemocratic enforcement of the 'growth' agenda by the G7 (the governments of the seven most economically powerful western industrial nations), the WTO (World Trade Organization) and other non-accountable international bodies and agreements (including NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Act).

The aims of those involved vary a great deal. Some are merely attempting to moderate the terms of emerging trade and other agreements and reduce the negative impact of globalization. Others, among them transformative feminists, are challenging the core agenda of globalization, the agreements themselves, and the right of the agencies and governments involved to impose them without democratic mandate or accountability.

Many of the key forces opposing globalization at this deep level know well that wholesale destruction of human communities and environment will continue as long as increases in profit and production for the market remain the only aim and measure of value in our world system. However, they have not yet generally acknowledged or addressed the deep patriarchal structuring of the colonial capitalist system they oppose. They do not recognize that achieving a world organized around the sustenance of human and non-human life rather than profit, will require, or rather *is* the empowerment of women.

Feminists are bringing to this broad field of contestation, the transformative women-centred perspectives they have forged in their varied but connected local struggles and their by now well established global dialogue and organizing. Their demands that women's devalued life-sustaining work and responsibility be recognized, honoured, generalized and supported are core challenges to neo-liberal globalization. Their struggle for the power to make women's concerns for individual and community reproduction, defining social priorities is central to transforming the world system.

Yet this is not generally understood and feminists have not yet gained a defining voice in the fast growing multi-sectoral organizing against globalization. Far from it in fact. Feminist voices are strangely muted and the feminist presence little acknowledged in accounts of the strategic debates around and collective resistance to globalization (Brecher *et. al.*; Hawken; Phillips).

Conclusion

Today, transformative feminists must foster feminist awareness among those opposing global forces at the same time as they foster awareness of global forces in feminist practice. The continued development of a powerful global feminist movement depends on both these things. It may

be no exaggeration to suggest that the fate of the world hangs in the balance.

Angela Miles teaches in the global feminist focus of the Adult Education and Community Development Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. She is a member of "Toronto Women for a Just and Healthy Planet." Her publications include a co-edited collection, Feminism: From Pressure to Politics (1989) and Integrative Feminisms: Building Global Visions 1960s-1990s (1996).

¹"Sisterhood" may be invoked too easily by those who fail to notice and honour important differences among women. However, at its best what has been recently and critically dubbed "sisterhood feminism" is grounded in the radical understanding that the liberation of even the most privileged women requires the liberation of all and that no women in our society, including the most privileged are truly free. "Sisterhood" for these feminists is a political vision of possibilities opened up when we understand and act on the shared interests of women which are revealed only at the deepest level if analysis and transformation (Miles 1979).

²For up to date information about the "World Women's March in the Year 2000" see the web pages of the International Liaison Committee (www.ffq.qc.ca/marche2000) and the Canadian Women's March Committee (www.canada.marchofwomen.org).

³Elsewhere, I have called transformative feminist perspectives, "integrative feminist perspectives" and described them and their significance in more detail (Miles and Finn 1989; Miles 1996); Charlotte Bunch also describes and discusses the significance of transformative feminisms, which she calls global feminisms (Bunch 1987).

⁴For a powerful portrayal of this process in Europe see the video "The Burning Times" about the history of witch burnings. It was directed by Donna Read and produced by Mary Armstrong and Margaret Pettigrew for Studio D of the National Film Board of Canada (Montreal 1990).

References

- Baffoun, Alya. "In Search of African Feminism." Special issue on "Feminism in Africa." *ECHOE: Women for Research and Development* II/III (1985): 4-6.
- Bhasin Kamla and Nighat Said Khan. *Some Questions about Feminism and Its Relevance in South Asia*. Second edition.. New Delhi, India: Kali for Women Press, 1999. First published in 1986.
- Brecher, Jeremy, Tim Costello, and Brendan Smith. "The Road from Seattle." *Z Magazine* (Jan. 2000): 40-43.
- Brodribb, Somer ed. *Reclaiming the Future: Women's Strategies for the 21st Century*. Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island: Gynergy Books, 1999.
- Bunch, Charlotte. *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in*

- Action: Essays 1968-1986*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987.
- Davies, Miranda, ed. *Third World, Second Sex: Women's Struggles and National Liberation*. Vol 1. London: Zed Press, 1983.
- Davies, Miranda, ed. *Third World, Second Sex: Women's Struggles and National Liberation*. Vol 2. London: Zed Press, 1986.
- Douthwaite, Richard. *The Growth Illusion: How Economic Growth Has Enriched the Few, Impoverished the Many, and Endangered the Planet*. Tulsa: Council Oaks Press, 1993.
- Hawken, Paul. "N30 WTO Showdown in Seattle." *Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures* 3 (Spring 2000): 48-53.
- Isla, Ana, Angela Miles and Sheila Molloy. "Stabilization/Structural Adjustment/Restructuring Canadian Feminist Issues in a Global Framework." *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* 16 (3) (1996): 116-121.
- Jayawardena, Kumari. *Feminism in Sri Lanka, 1975-1985*. Reprinted by N.Y.: Women's International Resource Exchange (WIRE) Service, n.d.
- Miles, Angela. "The Politics of Feminist Radicalism: A Study in Integrative Feminism." Unpublished PhD dissertation. Toronto: University of Toronto, 1979.
- Miles, Angela. *Integrative Feminisms: Building Global Visions, 1960s-1990s*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996
- Miles, Angela and Geraldine Finn, eds. *Feminism: From Pressure to Politics*. Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1989.
- Morgan, Robin, ed. *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984.
- Phillips, Jim. "What Happens After Seattle?" *Dollars and Sense* (Jan/Feb 2000): 15,16, 29-32.
- Read, Donna (Director). "Burning Times." Studio D, National Film Board of Canada, Montreal 1990.
- Ricciutelli, Luciana, June Larkin and Eimear O'Neill, eds. *Confronting the Cuts: A Sourcebook for Women in Ontario*. Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education Inc., 1998.
- Sen, Gita and Caren Grown. *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987.
- Schuler, Margaret, ed. *Empowerment and the Law: Strategies of Third World Women*. Washington DC: OEF International, 1986.
- Schuler, Margaret, ed. *Women, Law, and Development: Action for Change*. New York: OEF International, 1990.
- Schuler, Margaret, ed. *Freedom from Violence: women's Strategies from Around the World*. New York: OEF International, United Nations International Fund for Women, Women Ink., 1992.
- Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. London: Zed, 1989.
- Sparrow, Pamela, ed. *Mortgaging Women's Lives: Feminist Critiques of Structural Adjustment*. London and NJ: Zed Books, 1994.
- Stienstra, Deborah. *Women's Movements and International Organizations*. Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1994.
- Waring, Marilyn. *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988.
- Wine, Jeri and Janice L. Ristock, eds. *Women and Social Change: Feminist Activism in Canada*. Toronto: James Lorimer, 1991.
- World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet. *Official Report, Including Women's Action Agenda 21*. New York: Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) 1992.

BERNADETTE RAFFOUL

Bread into Stone

If this cross is a bit in my teeth
 then this chain is a beaded strap
 I could split my flesh open with
 if a turn failed around my neck

And if these hands keep folding under bank-
 ruptcy
 of the body and not the spirit
 then my prayers could be seen as curses
 against the man I invoked to redeem me
 I cry to carry these blisters on my feet
 then left lonely prints in middle eastern sand
 I walked barefoot all the way to the panto-
 mime
 and at each station I screamed aloud
 as I thought of Veronica I wiped my brow
 as smooth as a cannon ball from my thighs
 as dark as the back of my mouth

Did I hallucinate that black birth
 the apparition hung wet on a Phoenician
 bough?
 I've forgotten my own baby
 the dead limbs, the plucked petals
 the vacancy pumped between her legs
 from which my eyes followed a pool of ruby
 to the ground where my memories are kept
 hard enough for a crown my baby escapes me
 in time
 one karat for each hour of every day
 that I sift like sand through my blank toes
 while I curse my pain and walk alone

Bernadette Raffoul recently completed an MA in English and Creative Writing, from the University of Windsor.