

# Finite Disappointments or Infinite Hope

## Working Through Tensions Within Transnational Feminist Movements

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*Ce texte explore les défis face aux différences dans les organisations transnationales féministes et souligne la marginalisation et l'invisibilité des femmes rurales, des paysannes et des autochtones. Elle cite l'exemple de la Marche mondiale des femmes qui a été un agent féministe qui a construit des solidarités féministes autour de la souveraineté de la nourriture et au-delà des différences. En mettant l'accent sur la justice environnementale qui met en cause la gérance transnationale de la nutrition, l'auteure espère que les féministes qui gèrent l'oppression sur plusieurs fronts, puissent exprimer leurs désappointements et les utiliser pour explorer des sites d'espoir.*

In many countries, it is women who are first to experience increased workloads, health problems, and other damaging effects associated with the off-putting impacts of globalization, deterioration of agriculture, economic instability, and migration (Van Esterick; Horvorka, DeZeeuw and Njenga; Patil, Balakrishnan and Narayan; Perry). From food production and acquisition to food processing, preparation and serving food both within their homes and for the public, we know that women play a major role in feeding their communities worldwide (Van Esterick; Pandey; Horvorka 2009;

Desmarais; Sachs and Alston; Shiva). Food tends to shape, reflect, and mirror much of human nature and values (Van Esterick). Yet the study of food largely gets relegated to disciplines such as nutrition, economics, and agronomy, which according to Penny Van Esterick, are disciplines guided by rules of hard science. Many have been and continue to redefine the terms in which the globalized food system works and how it can be rearticulated. I call for a redefinition of food that requires an analysis that would take into account the complex circuits of power. I ask for us to reassess the contemporary food system in ways that question how power is created, reinforced, or disrupted across dynamic, multiple, and overlapping power imbalances across various axes of difference. An appropriate space to observe how such circuits operate is constituted by the engagement with and alliance-building framework on Food Sovereignty (FS) of the World March of Women (WMW). The WMW is one of the most dynamic contemporary transnational feminist networks and Food Sovereignty, as a political project, represents an innovative space that brings together the urban, rural, peasant, and Indigenous women of the world. Food Sovereignty aims to achieve a re-configuration and

re-articulation of power relations characterizing the contemporary food system and as a project that originates in the Global South.

In the first part of the paper I want to first theoretically address the identified challenges of working across difference in transnational feminist organizing, with a particular focus on the marginalization and invisibilization of rural, peasant, and Indigenous women. Borrowing from Chandra Talpade Mohanty I:

want to speak of feminism without silence and exclusion in order to draw attention to the tension and the emancipatory potential of crossing through, with, and over these borders in our everyday lives. (2)

Because I inevitably will leave people and issues out of this paper due to constraints, I draw from Mohanty "to address how the feminist writings I analyzed here, discursively colonizes the material" (19) I seek to speak about. In the mapping out of transnational feminist scholarship, my concerns with tensions and power within feminist movements will inevitably show. However, in the words of Mohanty, my "...comments and criticisms are intended to encourage, not blame or induce guilt" (110). I

believe that feminist theories, practices, and theoretical works can be used to counter inattention to rural and peasant women and help to address the context of rural women's lives when it comes to food systems and issues of food sovereignty (Sachs).

In highlighting a key dimension of environmental justice that challenges the food system's transnational governance, it is my hope that as feminists fighting and simultaneously navigating oppression on multiple fronts, we can reflect on our disappointments, using them as foundation to explore sites of possibility and hope.

### **Challenges of Working Across Difference in Transnational Feminist Organizing**

The body of literature on transnational feminism illustrates a field that is contested, in flux, and constantly evolving and shifting. Growing debate over questions of power, privilege, and representation has shown that at times, feminists—both academic and activists—may reinscribe and reinforce the very power imbalances feminism seeks to dismantle. Many scholars have argued for *feminisms* rather than one monolithic homogenized understanding of the discourses and practices that come to make up feminism. Viewing the field through a monolithic lens creates imbalances and sets the stage for how feminism should be understood and articulated. Any discourses or practices falling outside of this assumed norm is rendered invisible, as alternative, or erased altogether. Transnational feminist practices, “while they connect collectives located in more than one national territory, also embody specific social relations established between specific people, situated in unequivocal localities, at historically determined times” (Mahler 444). Contemporary understandings of transnational feminism developed as a response to exclusionary practices within feminist discourses, development discourses, globalization, and tensions within NGOs (Mohanty; Mahler and Pessar;

Grewal and Kaplan; Chowdhury; Dufour, Masson and Caouette; Patil; Bachetta; Alvaraz 2000, 2014; Blackwell; Conway 2012; Dempsey, Parker and Krone; Razack; Hawkesworth). Transnational practices vary and include organizational, networks, individual, collectives, local and national movements, and feminist ngos, international ngos who work towards addressing gender and feminist issues

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(Dufour, Masson and Caouette; Patil; Vargas; Alvarez 2000, 2014a, 2014b; Moghadam; Basu; Hewitt). Transnational processes are anchored in and transcend more than one nation-state (Mahler and Pessar). Sherene Razack articulates that scholars interested in analyzing women's agency within a globalizing context prefer the term transnational to other conceptualizations like international women's movement or global feminism. Indrapal Grewal and Caren Kaplan employ the term transnational and call into question the use of the term global feminism. These scholars argue that voices are not all the same, nor do they speak in unison (Razack; Grewal and Kaplan; Mohanty; Lock Swarr and Nagar). Breny Mendoza articulates

why voices cannot speak in unison, stating that transnational feminism has not been able to deliver the bases for political solidarity between women across race, ethnicity, sexuality, and national borders. In spite of the different frames in which transnational feminists envision themselves in relation to the theory and politics of feminism, it is clear that there are limitations that have and continue to rise. Such nuanced complex ways of understanding and making sense of transnational feminism gives way to various open interpretations of the field and emerges as a site where power is reproduced.

### **Decentering Power(s) In (and through) Transnational Feminist Organizing and Beyond**

As feminist discourses emerge and grow, it becomes apparent that a woman's social location shapes and impacts the ways in which she comes to understand feminism.

What transnational feminism has meant for some women is what Mohanty (2003) identifies as the reality of international, global processes and organizing, heavily rooted in Western discourses privileging Western definitions, and Western assumptions about how things should be. This concept endorses the idea that the West is the origin of all organizing, feminism, theory, discourse and thus perceives itself as having the power and authority to grant the rest of the world with a model and best practice to follow. According to Mohanty, the West, it is assumed, equates to “originality,” whereas postcolonial is perceived as “mimicry.” Oversimplifying, not recognizing, and taking for granted diversity within Western and Third World areas has not only created problems, but dangerous myths about women in the Global South, particularly rural and peasant women.

Philip McMichael asserts “to historicize food sovereignty is not simply to recognize its multiple forms and circumstances across time and space, but also to recognize its relations to the politics of capital” (1). If scholars

are not attentive to how they present rural and peasant women, they risk reproducing the very narratives Mohanty, Grewal and Kaplan, and Jacquie Alexander and Chandra Mohanty ask us to be weary of.

Carolyn Sachs provides an account of women in agriculture in a unique way, tracing three specific crops: corn, rice, and coffee. This preference of historicizing the genealogy of food movements by tracing crops rather than human bodies alone adds a nuanced layer and rewriting/writing in of Aboriginal, Indigenous, and First Nations peoples globally, and their knowledges and teachings that account for more than just human bodies, but rather acknowledges the land and the harvest that it provides us. In *Gendered Fields: Rural Women, Agriculture and Environment*, Sachs urges scholars to understand the daily lives of women and their situated knowledges. Sachs pushes scholars to shift how they conceptualize resistance in ways that capture non-traditional understandings of it. This creates space to affirm the role of women traditionally as plant gatherers, and as early inventors of horticulture, who have long studied plants and crops. With this understanding of women as historically, already knowledgeable inventors and scientists. Carolyn Sachs helps shift our traditional understanding of the hard sciences, and ways of perceiving women in the Global South, often the object of the West's conquest to save. Sachs provides an account of rural women and their agency beyond our contemporary understandings, one that disrupts traditional mainstream conceptualizations of rural and peasant women as solely recipients of knowledge imported from the West.

Building on Sarah Mahler and Patricia Pessar, transnational feminists often leave unanswered the question of who gets to define issues to be brought to the transnational political arena, who gets to participate in different forms of activism, whose voices are left out of various dialogues that are had, and how transnational feminism risks privileging women in positions

of power as well as organizations and nation-states (7). Not only must rural women always be made to disappear, Robyn Dallow states that "rural life and some degree of geographical isolation go hand-in-hand" (4). Geographically, metaphorically, and literally, rural women are rendered to the margins, the outskirts, and made to feel isolated and invisible. Rural women's community involvement

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is accepted and even expected as part of their "natural roles" as wives and mothers, but never as decision makers' (5). Women in the Global South have long been resisting and organizing despite limited dialogue around their agency. Irrespective of this, some scholars in positions of power still render their narratives as alternative or invisible.

While many scholars either erase completely narratives outside of the Americas, or risk essentializing and perpetuating colonial narratives, Leigh Brownhill and Terisa Turner provide a historical account of women's organizing in Kenya tracing the Mau Mau resistance dating as far back as the 1940s. Both Brownhill and Turner, and Emma Mawdsley,

introduce us to The Kenyan Green Belt Movement championed by Wangari Mathaai. Other scholars direct our attention to India, for instance. Anupam Pandey, Vandana Shiva, and Emma Mawdsley add to the literature and provide accounts of women's involvement in the Chipko movement. This way of tracing women in the Mau Mau and Chipko movements, as well as Sachs tracing crops, brings in actors typically not spoken about from Native American women in the U.S. to Indigenous peoples in Latin America and Africa.

Other counter-narratives draw our attention to the role of rural and peasant women in urban centres. Rural and peasant women who find themselves in urban centres due to the difficulty of finding work in rural agriculture tend to find deserted, vacant lands to begin growing crops, sometimes starting kitchen gardens (Sachs; Sachs and Alston; Hovorka, De Zeeuw and Njenga). In these cases, crops are cultivated in people's compounds, along roads, railways, and under power lines; livestock's is kept in compounds and slums, on vacant lands, while others are free-range and wander the city (Sachs; Sachs and Alston; Hovorka, De Zeeuw and Njenga). Other locations where women grow their crops include road reserves; bank and drainage channels; wetlands; contaminated scrap yards; dumping sites for solid and liquid waste; vacated industrial areas; family gardens; gardens belonging to community kitchens; community gardens; school gardens; gardens located on private lands and communal areas; public lands and institutional lands (Sachs; Sachs and Alston; Hovorka, De Zeeuw and Njenga). Many of these locations come with limited access to clean water, and lack electricity (Sachs; Sachs and Alston; Hovorka, De Zeeuw and Njenga). Simply put, lack of ownership and access to land drives women to growing crops in unsafe areas.

Experiences of sexism while seeking lands drive women to borrow and search for free unused plots in different, often dangerous neighbour-

hoods, garbage dumps, or undeveloped lands in valleys (Sachs; Sachs and Alston; Hovorka, De Zeeuw and Njenga). If women are lucky, they may find vacated plots of land closer to their homes of residence, or near their children's schools so their children can help them transport different crops after school. In other cases, women work collectively to find land so they can help each other out with tending to it (Sachs; Sachs and Alston; Hovorka, De Zeeuw and Njenga). Because they are seeking sources of income, many rural women arrive at urban locations cash poor and are often left with no choice but to turn to squatting, finding urban slums to reside in, or risking eviction and their crops being destroyed at any moment. Growing urban agriculture has meant that more women have been able to feed their families and grow medicinal herbs, and do so while saving money by avoiding market value products (Sachs; Sachs and Alston; Hovorka, De Zeeuw and Njenga). Increasingly many women have also engaged in urban agriculture as a means to not only feed their families and save money, but to bring an added source of income into their homes. In both small and large scale plots, women provide labour and yet production and land often still belong to the men (Sachs; Sachs and Alston; Hovorka, De Zeeuw and Njenga).

Furthermore, in some Latin American countries such as Peru, Bolivia, Mexico, and Venezuela, women are taking their cooking skills and transforming them into "commercialized housework" in order to support their families (Abarca 94). Community kitchens, also known as public kitchens in the literature, are complex spaces with the potential to both empower and subjugate women. Meredith Abarca shares that public kitchens are grounded in three basic principles: "to offer a space to listen to the voices of traditionally muted people; to recognize the validity of different fields of knowledge; build on trust which means keeping ourselves honest" (106). Kathleen Shroeder highlights how public kitchens, be-

yond being a safe space for women to gather, are prominent places in communities and a source of civic pride. It is said that public kitchens are so powerful that politicians understand the power of women who run them and tend to approach them during election season looking to win voters (Shroeder). Going back to the work of Sach, Sachs and Alston, Brownhill and Turner, and Mawdsley, we are still

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reminded of the value of shifting how scholars view rural women within agriculture as knowledge producers and scientists. This shift grants rural women the agency as experts working carefully with crops in ways that not only heal and feed their communities, but also brings profit and income.

The notion that certain issues are only taken up in the Global North and eventually travel to the Global South is problematic and has been a site of tension within transnational feminism. Mina Roces argues that while "not all countries could boast of a clearly organized movement for female enfranchisement, this did not mean that there were no women's movements in Asia even dating back to the 1920s and 1930s" (7).

Variations and diversity then should not be articulated as falling within a hierarchy, or failure. Even within movements that were in the same location, hemisphere, region or country, some women found that relations of power and dominance were present and often failed to acknowledge such differences.

While very little scholarship has been documented around Aboriginal/ Indigenous/ First Nations, Asian (both East and South), Caribbean and Middle-Eastern women organizing Desmarais (2007) acknowledges that much work still needs to be done around these regions. In 1989, the first Latin American Meeting of Peasant and Indigenous Organizations took place in Bogotá launching the 500 Years of Indigenous and Popular Resistance campaign. Since then, subsequent meetings have taken place in Guatemala in 1991 and Nicaragua in 1992 (Deere and Royce 2).

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Transnational movements such as La Via Campesina, The World March of Women, Latin American Coordinator of Rural Organizations (CLOC), The Continental Coordination of

Indigenous Nationalities and People of Abya Yala are all making strides to bridge many of these gaps within food movements. (Desmarais 2007; Deere and Royce). In various places women are leading the way but continuously being silenced and written out. Viewing the negative outcomes of globalization as mutually exclusive I argue has been detrimental to rural women.

Scholars such as Anupam Pandey continue to argue that women are solely victims, thus limiting the potential to incorporate them into higher levels of decisionmaking. Because many view women as victims unable to navigate globalization, such narratives are still used to justify and keep women outside of decision-making. Economists, politicians, policies,

decision-makers, men and women in positions of power and privilege, tend to provide partial accounts on situated perspectives of women, never stopping to consider that all knowledge is partial, situated and subject to distortions (Sachs 1996). While women do not have the key to solving all the world's problems, neither do men (Sachs 1996). To date, studies of both international globalization and antiglobalization movements have largely ignored women, yet women have been at the forefront of regional, national, international and transnational struggles.

Peter Rosset contends that rural women's voices traditionally are excluded from social, economic and political power. Many women are dedicated to organizing vis-à-vis non-violent means that are grounded in concrete demands, seeking recognition of their basic human and social rights (Rosset 7). They are concerned with the defense of rural livelihoods and increasingly, with the development of sustainable livelihoods that respect nature, and traditional knowledge (Rosset 7). Across the literature, the most striking narratives are out of India and point to the potential of women and traditional knowledge's.

In India, during the Chipko Movement, Garhwali women were turning towards organic farming in order to rejuvenate an ancient practice of farming (Pandey 351). Vandana Shiva, although contentious, provides data and narratives on the ways in which women have been producers of knowledge and continue to hold on to knowledge that many scientists, pharmaceutical companies and food corporations are seeking out.

The forest provides the means for sustainable food production systems in the form of nutrients and water, and women's work in the forest facilitates this process (Shiva 59). Rural women hold on to knowledge that many are not aware of. Bina Agarwal goes on to state that while rural women are by no means the sole repositories of this knowledge they are often the significant bearers of such information on the particular items they collect

or use, thus such information about local trees, grasses and food related forest produce which are required for nurturing families are threatened and under severe threat of food shortage conditions (Agarwal 58).

Pharmaceutical companies have threatened such knowledges by introducing patents and an attack on rural women's knowledge is further at risk when younger generations are

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Any attempts to undo the past must be engaged in collectively, working at all levels and across different regions. Given that privilege and access to resources are unequally distributed, Annette Desmarais points to how bringing women together from various regions allows them to exchange ideas, information and experiences about agricultural realities in different countries at local, national and international levels.

While tensions will always be present where people gather to organize,

for the most part rural women farmers have found power in numbers and working across borders transnationally has proven useful.

Rural women have had and continue to have agency and utilize various tools to resist and organize. They have been plant gatherers, early inventors of horticulture, studying plants and crops and passing such knowledge down to younger generations (Sachs 1996; Shiva). Rural women's work provides various insights on understanding how gender relations in rural places have largely ignored women (Sachs 1996). While power imbalances limit the effectiveness of some of this organizing, progress is being made.

The reluctance of scientists, researchers, policy makers, politicians, etc. to incorporate women's knowledge into their conceptions of problems has slowed down the process of solving various injustices including hunger, environmental degradation and sexism, classism and other such forms of domination are at the root cause (Sachs 1996).

Understanding the daily lives of rural women is important as it demystifies our understandings of who they are and how they work. Understanding their situated knowledge and that there are multiple women's knowledge's (Desmarais) opens us up to finding new ways of advocating for rural women and working along side, not in front or ahead of them.

## **Conclusion**

The future of transnational solidarities, according to Paola Bachetta, depends largely upon "a continued ability to self-critique and a mutual will to avoid bulldozing, effacing, distorting and excluding" (970). Sachs (2010) suggests women worldwide become more interconnected though the process of global restructuring and that...

it does not imply that women will know, nor form alliances or organize with other women, or that their situations are the same,

however, it does mean that the impact of global economy on their lives will be strengthened as corporations increasingly consider and compare the advantages and possibilities of using women's labour. (141)

Mainstream assumptions often romanticize the rural woman and her work. These assumptions have impacted how rural women are perceived and thus how they continue to be left out of roles that impact their day-to-day lives. Paola Moya argues that any attempts to work with others across differences require us examining our shadow selves and parts of us that we are not always proud of. Moya quotes Cherrie Moraga who eloquently and beautifully articulates,

Because the source of oppression form not only our radicalism, but also our pain, to do the kind of world self-examination requires us to admit how deeply "the mans" words have been ingrained in us. The project of examining our own locations within the relations of domination becomes even riskier when we realize that doing so might mean giving up whatever privileges we have managed to squeeze out of this society by virtue of our own social locations. We are afraid to admit that we have benefitted from the oppression of others. We fear the immobilizations threatened by our own incipient guilt. We fear we might have to change our lives once we have seen ourselves in the bodies of the people we have called different. We fear the hatred, anger, and vengeance of those we have hurt. (Moya 150)

As scholars we must shift how we conceptualize feminism. Peggy Antrobus highlights that within Inuit tradition, story telling takes form of a spiral. She challenges feminists to perceive the transnational feminist movements as a spiral:

A spiral is open ended, continuous, ever enlarging our understanding of events, our perspectives. The global women's movement can be thought of as a spiral, a process that starts at the centre (rather than at the beginning of the line) and works its way outwards, turning, arriving and what might appear to be the same point, but in reality, at an expanded understanding of the same event. A spiral is dialectic, allowing for the organic growth of a movement of women organizing- a movement in a state of on-going evolution as consciousness expands in the process of exchanges between women, taking us backwards (to rethink and reevaluate old positions) and forwards (to new areas of awareness). (21)

Shifting towards Sachs's approach to rural women as knowledge producers, rural women's agency are pushed forward rather than the constant message of them being impoverished recipients of globalization with nothing to offer. By shifting the narrative and giving space for alternative ways of knowing and being to be validated, hierarchies of power slowly disentangle.

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