

# Is Global Feminism Possible?

## Developing "Partnership" in a University Linkage Project

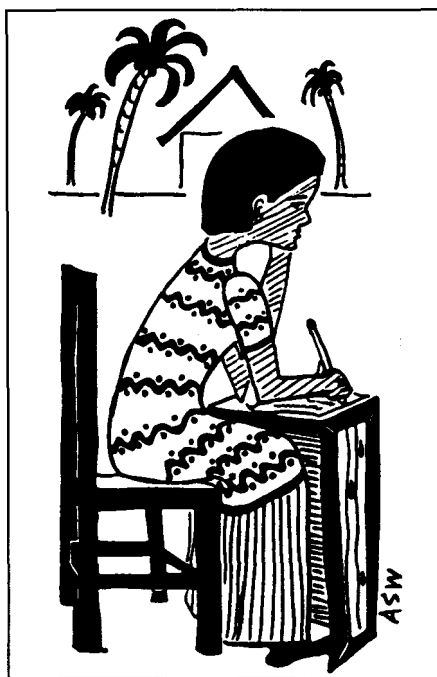
by Marilyn Porter and  
Saparinah Sadli

*Les auteures font un bilan de leurs expériences des quatre dernières années. Elles tentent de démontrer comment on peut arriver à développer un mouvement féministe global, basé sur l'égalité et la confiance, par l'entremise de projets de peu d'envergure.*

This article is based on one that the two directors of the four-year linkage project between the Women's Studies Program at Memorial University and Program Kajian Wanita (graduate Women's Studies) at Universitas Indonesia presented at the Sixth International Interdisciplinary Women's Studies Conference in Adelaide. It was our first opportunity to reflect on our experience of working together, and while we had already prepared many joint documents, we found the preparation of this article the most valuable in terms of trying to *understand* what had been involved in our partnership. We presented the paper jointly—each contributing the material relevant to our side of the partnership. We have tried to preserve that sense of dialogue between us.

We framed our discussion within the concept of "global feminism." This concept first appeared at the beginning of "second wave feminism" in the West, and has since become a key element in the thinking of many northern feminists concerned with relations between feminists in the North and the South (Morgan; Miles). Recently, feminists from the South have also begun to use the concept (Sen and Grown; Shiva). Sometimes "global feminism" is used to encompass a wide variety of ways in which women all over the world deal with problems that the writer sees as common to all women. Some-

times it is applied to specific international groupings or campaigns, often originating in international fora, such as United Nations Conferences. But in the increasing use of the concept, it is often not clear whether the writer is claiming that there is an actual, coherent global *movement*, and if so, how uniform or coherent it is, or whether it simply refers to an *aspira-*



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Artist: Anne S. Walker

tion shared by those women who do, in fact, work together.

Of course, "global feminism" is an attractive idea, but like all such ideas, it carries with it certain dangers. In this case, we see two dangers. One is that it may work at too abstract or general a level. Cooperation among feminists at the United Nations does not necessarily reflect the reality of the many other women who never go near UN fora. In the enthusiasm generated in such international gatherings, it is easy to assume that such feelings are much more widespread than they really are. The other danger is that the kinds of feminists who

have developed the concept tend to come from the North, or to be rooted in the intellectual frameworks of the North. It behooves us to be wary that we are not accepting a new form of intellectual imperialism, however unintentionally. For these reasons, we decided to look at the particular work we have been doing in this project in the light of "global feminism." Is it a useful concept in the context of one attempt to work together across national, geographic, political, and cultural differences?

In the scope of one article it is impossible to deal with all aspects of our relationship. We decided therefore to address one aspect of our work together and how we think it affects or is affected by our feminisms. The aspect we have chosen to focus on is "partnership." It is a key concept for the Indonesian government's formulations about women, and in their plans to include women in development. It is also a key concept in the Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) policy for how to develop sustainable projects in the countries they are "aiding." And, it is also a word that we use ourselves to describe, at least some, aspects of what we are trying to do.

But in each of these formulations, the word "partnership" means significantly different things. While the explanation of "partnership" given by the Indonesian government and by CIDA often sounds as if feminists might be able to share it, or at least live with it, further examination shows that their uses of "partnership" can act as a cloak for continuing sexism (compounded in CIDA's case, by suggestions of neocolonialism). While we have struggled to work through and, if necessary, to subvert the official interpretations, at the same time we have been struggling to find ways of building a genuinely equal, feminist

partnership between the two women's studies programs.

We planned and wrote the paper together, but we divided the sections between us for the purpose of presenting it. In this version, we have kept our different "voices." We hope that this will not confuse our readers, but, instead, give them a sense of the conversations we had and of the way our working together grows out of our different approaches.

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*Men support women's desire to be active citizens, as long as they do not forget their main duties as a wife.*

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### The meaning of "partnership" in Indonesia

Saparinah: Within the Indonesian cultural context, the idea of partnership can

be explained in relation to the concept of "*kemitrasejajaran pria-wanita*," which has been translated as "equal partnership between men and women." This concept was officially formulated in the 1988-1993 State Guidelines, in the chapter on the role of women. It has recently been strengthened by a statement in a speech by the President of Indonesia on the occasion of *Hari Ibu* 1995—a celebration of the women's movement in Indonesia. In his speech he said that "the realization of equal partnership between men and women is the basis for a happy and harmonious family life" (*Kompas*). We should note that within the Indonesian context it is officially and politically stressed that the family plays an important role in the transmission of cultural values, so that equality within the family becomes the key for the achievement of true "partnership" between men and women.

In Indonesia, this "partnership" concept is an opportunity for both men and women to work out a relationship which can be considered—by both men and women—as an equal partnership. Women, at least women activists, want to use the concept to achieve actual equality. This means, however, that men should also be educated about the conse-

quences of this sort of relationship for them as men. This is a challenge because in Indonesia formally, or *de jure*, men and women already have the same opportunities, but *de facto* women face many limitations in the exercise of their rights, both socially and culturally. For example, women in Indonesia are always being reminded of their *kodrat*. This term refers to the specific biological aspects of being a woman (her potential to become a biological mother), and at the same time, *kodrat* is used to remind women of the social consequences and responsibilities of being a mother and a wife. Although the concept of *kodrat* can be applied equally to men, it never is. Men are never reminded of their responsibilities as fathers. Furthermore, within the State Guidelines, the *kodrat* of women is stressed. This means that there is a clear contradiction within the State Guidelines regarding the idea of the development of *equal* partnership between men and women.

It is also a challenge because, as in other cultures, the everyday situation is one of asymmetry between men and women. This means, among other things, that many men consider themselves, and indeed, are considered by women, to be superior human beings, with all that that implies. A woman may believe that it is her right to be treated as an equal partner but this is often not seriously supported by men—whether their ideas are hidden or open. For instance, men support women's desire to be active citizens, but only as long as they do not forget their main duties as a wife and mother. Men support women's aspirations to move up the corporate ladder, but at the same time they limit women's chances to occupy decision-making positions. In other words, much male support for women's equality is limited to words, and does not translate into real, effective support.

Within the Indonesian context, equal partnership between men and women is, therefore, an opportunity to work out at least three interrelated attitudes—women's attitudes toward

themselves and towards men as having the right to be accepted as equal to men; men's attitudes and beliefs that women are, like themselves, human beings with shortcomings and strengths; and men's and women's attitudes that the aspiration of partnership is a process that should start early and become part of the experience of both boys and girls while they are growing up.

The aspirations of partnership in a different context, such as in the linkage project, is, therefore, a process which should be worked out *together*, in which both partners consider each other as *equals* working towards a common goal.

### CIDA's version of "partnership"

Marilyn: CIDA has emphasized the idea of "partnership" at least since it developed its last full-fledged policy document "Sharing Our Future: Canadian International Development Assistance." It is significant that the word is especially used in the smaller institutional linkages or NGO projects. It is not usually used as much in the big trade-oriented, or bilateral projects. It is not hard to work out what this means in terms of CIDA's priorities. Is it possible that "partnership" is a nice idea, but too expensive for the "real world" of trade and large dam-building projects, but can safely be left in the hands of universities and NGOs who will be content with much less money anyway?

Our project was funded under the International Cooperation and Development Section/Education Institutional Program (ICDS/EIP). The articulation of the concept of partnership is much clearer in its successor—the University Partnerships in Cooperation and Development (UPCD) program—where it appears in the title. And while it is curiously *not* there in the main goal of the program, it does appear in Objective 2 "to contribute to the establishment of linkages fostering sustainable partnerships between Canadian and developing country institutions," and thereafter in the guidelines set out for appli-

cants. It is clear, too, that by using phrases like “common understanding,” “mutual benefit,” and “a recognition of the contribution each can bring to the partnership,” that CIDA’s official thinking accords with how those of us sitting here might understand “partnership.” But, how does this work out in practice? While I draw my examples from the ICDS/EIP guidelines and regulations, these have not changed much for the UPCD projects.

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*Our project was explicitly designated as a “linkage project,” between two institutions with common goals.*

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the accepted proposal—is to “support the Women’s Studies Master’s Program at Universitas Indonesia,” with the ultimate goal of “promoting women’s social and economic equality in Indonesia and ensuring their full participation in the national development.” This is to be achieved in various ways, which can broadly be described as “enhancing the Universitas Indonesia’s institutional capacity to deliver the Master’s program by providing training and professional development opportunities for Universitas Indonesia faculty and the provision of various materials.”

Already we can see a key contradiction. How does the project intend to strengthen and enhance women’s studies in Indonesia? It is implied that this will be accomplished by providing materials and the “expertise” supposedly resident in the Memorial University program. All the references to the development of the curriculum and materials, the provision of scholarships in Canada, the provision of workshops at Universitas Indonesia and even the provision of books, most of which are assumed to come from Canada, depend on the assumption that there is some “expertise” at Memorial which should be passed to the program at the University of Indonesia.

This view of development, known as the “technical transfer” view, sits oddly with the location of the project in an Institutional Linkage program, which emphasizes the importance of “partnerships” between Canadian and developing country institutions. “Partnership,” if not linkage, surely connotes an *equal* relationship, and one which envisions the *exchange* of skills and knowledge, not the passive reception by one partner of what the other has to offer.

I have already alluded to the lowly status and arms-length relationship that institutional linkage projects have. They are also very cheap, depending on the contributions in labour of full-time Canadian academics, who fit their involvement in such projects into their regular work schedules. Canadian universities are supposed to contribute labour and “in-kind” support to the project. By the same token, the Indonesian university is also expected to contribute enormous amounts of in-kind support and faculty time. But the rub is that while the Canadian university is rewarded with quite generous “overheads,” fringe benefits, and salary replacements to cover the loss of its faculty time, there is no such recompense for the “developing country” faculty.

In the project, then, we found ourselves positioned in a profoundly contradictory relationship, as defined by CIDA. Fortunately the arms-length relationship we have with CIDA made it possible for us to try to work out those contradictions in our conduct of the project, and also to remedy the fiscal imbalances with some judicious creative accounting.

### **The linkage project**

Saparinah: This project, as with many other linkage projects, included the “transfer of knowledge and expertise.” Because this project was on women’s studies, it also involved the transfer of concepts about feminism, feminist thinking, and doing research with a feminist perspective. All concepts are culture bound—especially

concepts that are rooted in western culture. A linkage project, therefore, necessarily includes, more or less, a transfer of culture. For example, because the books are in English, the concepts they use have been developed in the West. This is potentially a dangerous situation. But there is a big difference between being given access to concepts rooted in another culture, or being provided with an alternative window through which to look at the world, where you can choose and interpret the concepts, selecting those that are relevant to our needs rather than having them imposed upon you. In an asymmetrical project, such as this one, the trick is to find ways of working together to translate and make the concepts relevant within the Indonesian context. This was, and is, a challenge in our linkage project.

We have tried to structure the linkage project between Kajian Wanita, Universitas Indonesia and Women’s Studies, Memorial University in such a way that both parties (two universities with different experiences of the subject matter and with different cultural contexts) could develop together, in a spirit of “partnership” a *new* women’s studies program within the institutional limits of each university (and CIDA) but with the objective of developing a truly *Indonesian* graduate women’s studies program. This

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*Because this project was on women’s studies, it also involved the transfer of feminist thinking.*

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was our aspiration and remains our goal.

How does the Indonesian notion of partnership apply to a linkage project between two institutions in which one of the partners (usually) has more expertise, more funds, more experience—in short—is “superior” to the other? It needs the belief, by *both* partners that the creation of a

true partnership has to be worked out from the inception of the program. The ingredients would be: respect for each other's strengths and shortcomings and an honest attitude in working together on a program which will be beneficial to both partners as seen by both partners (and not simply as imposed by the "superior" partner). For example, the project provided for two potential Kajian Wanita staff members to study for the Masters in Women's Studies at Memorial. This element in the project was developed together and the selection process for the candidates was carried out jointly. In building up our library, the Indonesian and Canadian librarians worked together in planning the collection of English language materials, while increasing amounts of the library budget have been directed towards the collection of Indonesian language materials. The topics of the annual workshops presented at Kajian Wanita were decided in joint meetings of faculty of the two programs, and decisions about the following years' work were taken at the same time. The program of activities was decided by Kajian Wanita faculty with input from Memorial University faculty and then implemented by both faculties on their separate campuses. The evaluation of the project is being jointly developed and implemented so that each women's studies program can analyze their own needs and how they have (or have not) been met in the project.

Our linkage project with Memorial University was conceived as an effort towards creating a partnership in which "equal" does not mean "exactly the same," but means equally respecting each other's differences and taking into account each other's needs in achieving the objective of the linkage. In our case, the project was intended to strengthen program and professional skills of Kajian Wanita faculty as the partner with less experience or knowledge about setting up a graduate women's studies program while, at the same time, enriching the Memorial University program by involving faculty and students in a close

working relationship with feminists from another institutional and cultural context.

Marilyn: I do not have time, here, to describe everything Memorial University Women's Studies have learned and gained from working with Kajian Wanita over the last four years. For us, one of the biggest difficulties was in recognizing that we had any "superior" expertise or experience. Of course, in some ways we were a little more developed in terms of institutional forms (although I should point out that the graduate program at Universitas Indonesia pre-dates the Masters in Women's Studies at Memorial by two years!), but in the grand scheme of things this didn't seem to count for much. Certainly we were very reluctant to accept that *any* transfer would be helpful. Our position was always, "we can't tell you how to do it. All we can do is tell you what we did and what we think worked (and what didn't) in our context." As the project progressed, I think we became better at presenting our experience and then, both backing off and allowing Kajian Wanita to develop the consequences and interpretations for themselves, and working together with them to develop the Indonesian conceptual frameworks they needed.

This relates to a much greater difficulty—the inescapable fact that most of the books in the library collection we were building were in English and rooted in western experience. With very few exceptions *all* of the concepts and theories we used, including the very word "feminism" came from the North and had a northern bias. Creating an equal partnership in this biased framework proved much more difficult. Our excellent librarians have made great strides in finding material in Indonesian (and in Dutch) to make the collection more balanced.

Meanwhile, we found that as women's studies faculty went to Jakarta, worked with Kajian Wanita faculty there and taught the two Kajian Wanita graduate students at Memorial University we began to develop a

collective knowledge about working with feminists from another context. The whole program benefitted enormously from the presence of two Indonesian students. It broke down the homogeneity and isolation of Newfoundland and introduced both faculty and students to new ideas and an awareness of diversity that would have been difficult to generate without them.

## Conclusion

We are still wrestling with how to develop truly indigenous Indonesian feminist theories which we see as the principal goal of the project. It is an inevitably long and complex process. But we can say that it takes both partners and that it can only happen within the trusting relationship of *equal partnership*.

This is a brief article, and it touches on a number of issues that have exercised feminists working in international contexts. There are no easy answers. But if we have learned anything from our four years of working together and our reflections on it, it is that real progress only comes after an equal and trusting relationship has been established. This involves personal relationships embedded in group relationships. It sounds obvious to say that individual women must spend time together, work together, and learn to understand each other's situation and approaches before they can truly appreciate and work within each other's diversity. But it is often forgotten that this cannot be done at the level of international institutions and government legislation. Most often the greatest achievements within the UN process come when *individual* women from different NGOs and from diverse locations come together around a common concern or a specific project. They work together primarily as *individuals* and not as "representatives" of their NGOs or diversities. We are suggesting that the route to "global feminism" begins in these personal relationships and then builds across other linkages in an incremental way.

It is a slow process, of course, but if we can achieve a genuinely global feminism, based on all the richness of women's experiences throughout the world, then it will be well worth it.

*Marilyn Porter is a professor of sociology at Memorial University and a member of the women's studies program. After ten years working with and on women's economic lives in rural Newfoundland she became involved in developing some of the same ideas in an international context, and has spent the last five years working with Kajian Wanita and trying to contribute to the development of Indonesian feminism.*

*Saparinah Sadli is a professor of psychology at Universitas Indonesia. She is the founder and director of Kajian Wanita—the first and only graduate program in women's studies in Indonesia. She has been active at all levels of feminist activity from participating in government level negotiations and as an NGO member of the Indonesian team at UN conferences to involvement with women's reproductive health issues in rural areas in Indonesia.*

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