

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Sohela Nazneen and Maheen Sultan (eds), *Voicing Demands: Feminist Activism in Transitional Contexts*, London: Zed Books, 2014. ISBN: 9781780329680 (cloth); ISBN: 9781780329673 (paper); ISBN: 9781780329703 (ebook)

Voicing Demands is an edited collection of essays on feminist engagements with development in the global South. Written by scholars and activists located in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia, the book emerges out of an international multidisciplinary collaboration entitled “[Pathways of Women’s Empowerment](#)”, which aims to make feminist activism visible as a pathway to social change and development. From their perspectives as insiders, the contributors trace the history of the movement they have been involved in to challenge assumptions about the positive relationships often established between voice, constituency-building, and empowerment in diverse transitional contexts or, as the editors put it, in “countries that have or are now experiencing shifts in political power structures” (p.3). In the introduction, Sohela Nazneen and Maheen Sultan offer “political opportunity structures” (POS) as the conceptual framework for the subsequent chapters. POS scholars consider the factors external to movements that constrain or expand their opportunities to issue challenges to the dominant political system and thus bring about social change. More specifically, Nazneen and Sultan maintain that during the last two decades, transnational activist networks, the NGO-ization of the women’s movement, and the power of donors, along with the rise of conservative political and religious forces, have shaped the feminist agenda, often de-politicizing and de-radicalizing it. They also point to the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 as a marker of the shift in women’s collective history from opposition and resistance to entry in policy spaces as interlocutors of the state via non-governmental organizations as well as what Nazneen and Sultan

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call “gender machineries” or government agencies dedicated to women’s advancement. Moreover, they argue that women’s marginalization from patriarchal political parties pushed them to develop other strategies, and to focus “on state and civil society arenas as key sites for channeling their voice and activism” (p.23). Finally, Nazneen and Sultan critique established feminist leaders for neglecting to build a constituency and engage younger allies. Following the introduction are seven chapters; there is no conclusion.

In Chapter 1, Nazneen and Sultan themselves analyze the strategies deployed by three women’s and feminist organizations in post-authoritarian Bangladesh, presenting those cases as exceptions to the literature that claims that feminist voice weakens after a democratic transition. The authors argue that middle-class feminists successfully led negotiations with the state by framing their demands differently according to the particularities of distinct participants as well as audiences; by using their personal connections to officials; by building transnational links; and especially by forming national coalitions. In Chapter 2, Cecilia Sardenberg and Ana Alice Alcantara Costa attribute the achievements of Brazilian feminists to women’s rapprochement with the state following the democratic transition; their participation in transnational women’s spaces; the rise of feminist NGOs; the growth of “popular feminism”; and finally to the “highly participatory character of [two national conferences for women that]...allowed for the formulation of [a platform and public policy plans] that recognize the diversity...and existing inequalities among women” (p.56), thus redefining and revitalizing feminist struggles.

In Chapter 3, Gertrude Fester notes that the South African women’s movement experienced its strongest, most unified moment during the anti-apartheid struggles when the women’s coalition transcended race- and class-based tensions to produce a charter acknowledging women’s heterogeneity. Likewise, in Chapter 4, Alexandra Pittman and Rabéa

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Naciri explain that “unnecessary tensions and power struggles inherent in a universal approach” (p.122) were circumvented given that the regional coalition of feminist NGOs across the Middle East and North Africa for national reform and citizenship allowed each campaign member to adapt strategies and demands to their own context. In contrast, Fester also argues that the democratic transition in South Africa “was not a feminist resolution” (p.86): feminist activism was sectorialized, marginalizing younger women and lesbians, and grassroots constituency-building work was abandoned to privilege advocacy work.

In Chapter 5, Afiya Shehrbano Zia maintains that even democratic governments broker deals with “centres of patriarchal control” (p.153) to retain power; women experience violence and marginalization regardless of the nature of civilian or military leadership. Mariz Tadros, in Chapter 6, claims that feminist accomplishments were discredited as a result of secular feminists’ previous rapprochement with the dictatorial state and their contestation of the Islamization of Egypt, as well as the quango-ization of women’s activism following the democratic transition. In Chapter 7, Elieen Kuttub affirms that the rise of the Islamic movement destabilized the social and political space created during the 1987 uprising in which Palestinian women had held leadership roles in their overlapping “resistance against colonial occupation and patriarchy” (p.222). Tadros adds that with religion coming to represent “a normative framework for engaging with public and private issues” (p.193), Muslim women in Egypt utilized their religious ties to build a wider constituency and claim public space without an explicit articulation of a feminist voice. Zia critiques this tactic of “approaching women’s rights exclusively from within an Islamic framework” (p.177), arguing that it serves to legitimize the recent post-modernist diasporic Islamist feminist digital movement in lieu of homegrown secular Pakistani feminism. Conversely, Pittman and Naciri propose the Middle East and North Africa coalition’s strategy as

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a viable alternative: campaign members framed their claims outside of religious arguments and instead used a constitutional rights-based approach in order to re-position citizenship as a family matter.

Throughout their chapters, the scholars draw attention to the ambivalence of certain “political opportunities”. They recognize that without the mobilization of resources, feminist leaders cannot organize members nor sustain movement activity. Conversely, Pittman and Naciri assert that state-monitored international funding undermines “indigenous” NGO work. Along with other factors such as the fracturing of the Pakistani women’s movement and the resurgence of political and religious conservatism and violence against women, Zia claims that extra-national financial backing led secular feminist activists to engage in private negotiations with the state. Similarly, Kuttub stresses that the NGO-ization of Palestinian women’s activism structurally delinked women’s issues from the national context, creating a gap between women’s leadership and women at the grassroots, which was further exacerbated by the return of women in exile in the diaspora promoting the post-Oslo agreement framework of peace.

The authors point to the sectarianism that informs the women’s and feminist movements within a given national context. However, they do not explicitly couch their discussion in the social movement literature that emphasizes that collective identity-building is an unstable and fraught process between various leaders and members. Moreover, the contributors do not offer a critique of the hierarchies that shape transnational relationships between different women from distinct national contexts. Nor do they raise any direct concerns about the fragility of postcolonial sovereignty. Instead, they naturalize geographical borders. As such, the contributors fail to address the effects of neoliberal globalization on the configuration of their respective states and, in turn, on their movements.

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In centralizing feminist activism in their work, the authors contribute dynamic applications of the POS model. They assert that women's and feminist movements are not simple reflections of power, contending that women strategize according to the local, national, and international opportunities available to them at specific moments in time. Moreover, Pittman and Naciri demonstrate that women can also create political openings from which they can advance their feminist agenda. Nevertheless, in their analyses, the authors tend to reify cultural practices such as religion as rigid structures. They remain constrained by the POS framework, neglecting to examine political processes as cultural productions.

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