

Standpoint

Beijing Plus Ten, or Feminism at the Crossroads?

by Marnia Lazreg

As the decade following the 1995 Beijing Conference comes to a close, feminist and international organisations are taking stock of women's achievements, and seeking to make new recommendations for the ever-receding goal of gender equality. At first glance, it seems as though the term "gender," a successor to the once-preferred "women," whether coupled with qualifiers such as "development" or used alone, has permanently entered national and political discourses. Who would dare resist the ritual of its invocation?

Yet, as the inexorable global economy machine rolls on, and reforms ostensibly meant to democratise political institutions sweep over much of the once-called "third" world, feminism – as a movement for promoting women's rights to equality with men, and "liberation" of women from practices and systems of thought that have kept them complicit in their own subjugation – has undergone transformations that have blunted its effectiveness. In fact, there are signs that it is losing speed, and may have to reinvent itself.

The decision not to hold another world conference, for example, and instead to simply assess what has been achieved in the past decade testifies to the movement's disarray, despite the tactical reasons invoked to justify the postponement. The fears of providing conservative groups with a forum, and running the risk of having to accommodate their agendas in a revised Beijing Platform, are real. However, the unspoken implication is as troubling as the conference postponement itself. It means that consensus on politically "progressive" feminist ideals may have eroded as the international context has evolved. This disturbing possibility cannot be dismissed as a passing political mood that can be ridden out by taking a wait-and-see attitude. Rather, it is time to ask uncomfortable questions and take a hard look at the changing role of gender/women in a changed world.

Feminism's apparent loss of speed is the outcome of a number of related factors. To begin with, "globalisation," a well-delineated international division of labour among nations driven as much by financial as by technological power, has brought to the fore pressing issues. These, even though gendered, are posed in general terms. The new language of international organisations favours "poverty reduction" or "social justice" – expressions that claim to apply to both women and men, but which make gender an ancillary category of poverty or injustice, rather than one of its constitutive elements. This signals a troubling shift of focus, as well as the lower priority accorded gender/women. Similarly, new discourses around "conflict resolution," not to speak of "terrorism" (another rising issue) elide the fundamental importance of women to the aetiology of violence. When women seek to participate in peace-building events, they find that their contribution still tends to be defined in essentialist terms as part of a simple female, life-giving, and aggression-free nature, which by definition is unable to unravel the complexities of the world of realpolitik and wars. Consequently, women are not able to contribute as effectively as men to important peace negotiations that decide the future of war-torn countries.

The newly favoured vocabulary of international intervention also reflects a changing political landscape locally. Here, formal liberalisation essentially imposed from without, has resulted in the token representation of women, and/or women making alliances with political parties inimical to women's citizenship rights. On the one hand, new political spaces emerging in the wake of "democratisation" have enabled women to exercise their political agency. On the other hand, such spaces are constrained by their very nature; they are male-defined and dominated, and are usually made available to women for political reasons that have little to do with women's advancement. One thinks of religion-based parties throughout North Africa and the Middle East, which promote women candidates as a way of burnishing their image

and as a challenge to state feminism. This process is accompanied by forms of consciousness among women that seek parity with men within the parameters of religion. This blurring of the religious and the secular suggests lack of power to change the established gendered order, rather than freedom to transcend its limitations.

This failure of national governments seriously to promote women's social citizenship rights is reflected in the continuing and growing phenomenon of First Ladies' appropriating power, which subverts the emancipatory goals of women's movements, and generates anti-feminist reactions in civil society movements already proving reluctant to embrace progressive gender agendas. Having lost the capacity to organise their economies (not always or necessarily because of structural adjustments), local states still pretend to be in control, often at the expense of women.

Decentralisation, instead of advancing public participation, becomes reduced to a charade, with local players engaging in tribal and ethnic jockeying for what is left of the postcolonial political spoils, in ways that threaten to set back legislative and policy changes that have occurred at national level. Power devolution in some parts of Africa, for example, has been accompanied by the re-assertion of localised customary laws, some of which are religion-based, not to mention inimical to women's interests. A parallel outcome, which is also a measure of women's increased vulnerability, is their recourse to old customary methods of shaming men into socially appropriate behaviour. For instance, one hears of older women disrobing before young military men as a form of protest against the economic policies of their governments.

At the same time, the foreign policies of countries such as the US and other Western nations towards the peoples of the South have sparked collective anger that is often expressed through social conservatism. The disturbing images of women GIs joining in the sexual torture of men at Abu Ghraib prison have damaged women's movements across the Muslim world, where local feminists have long had to defend themselves against the widely-held perception that they merely import "Western" cultural ideas and practices of "equality" that are deeply offensive to Islamic sensibilities.

For Africa in particular, the last decade has been one of incessant transition, with collective identities and political consciousness continuously being undermined by powerful economic interests and their accompanying epistemologies.

How, in such a context, can we nurture and protect African feminist thought? The most important step is to identify women willing to develop a ruthless critique of the emerging ideologies that currently provide justification for the violation of human rights and civil liberties in the name of self-styled, unilateral policies. These ostensibly aim at fighting subversion or "terror" when in fact they often protect entrenched oligarchies and business interests. The second step would be to develop a cross-cultural, cross-continental federation of political movements to act as an independent, non-partisan force de frappe for African women. This would offer a sort of women's United Nations – a body that performs a watchdog function, and which may lobby donors to impose sanctions on derelict states that violate women's rights. For it has become clear that nation-states generally lack the will and the capacity to devise and/or implement policies that promote women's rights. So far, those that have instrumentalised gender have done so primarily as a result of outside pressure. As the sovereignty of nation-states is further eroded by the requirements of the global political economy, women's reliance on their governments to act on their behalf will become increasingly compromised.

Having a strategically united women's political force that could weigh in on aid disbursements or states' access to international forums by making these contingent on a

clean “gender record” would be more effective than courting heads of governments or their wives. A model can be found in the conditions that must be met by applicants to the European Union. But all of this is empty talk if women’s organisations and educational institutions do not get off the international dole. Seeking means of self-financing instead of relying on outside disbursements will build a foundation not only for autonomous action, but also for creative thinking. Africa is a rich continent. A gender fund could be set up by convincing all countries to invest a small percentage of their revenues from natural resources. Individual women and men could also be encouraged to make tax-free contributions. The point is to be financially and intellectually autonomous. Barring this, we will continue to be beholden to others who will tell us how to help ourselves.

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