Feminist Praxis

Women's Transnational and Place Based Struggles for Change

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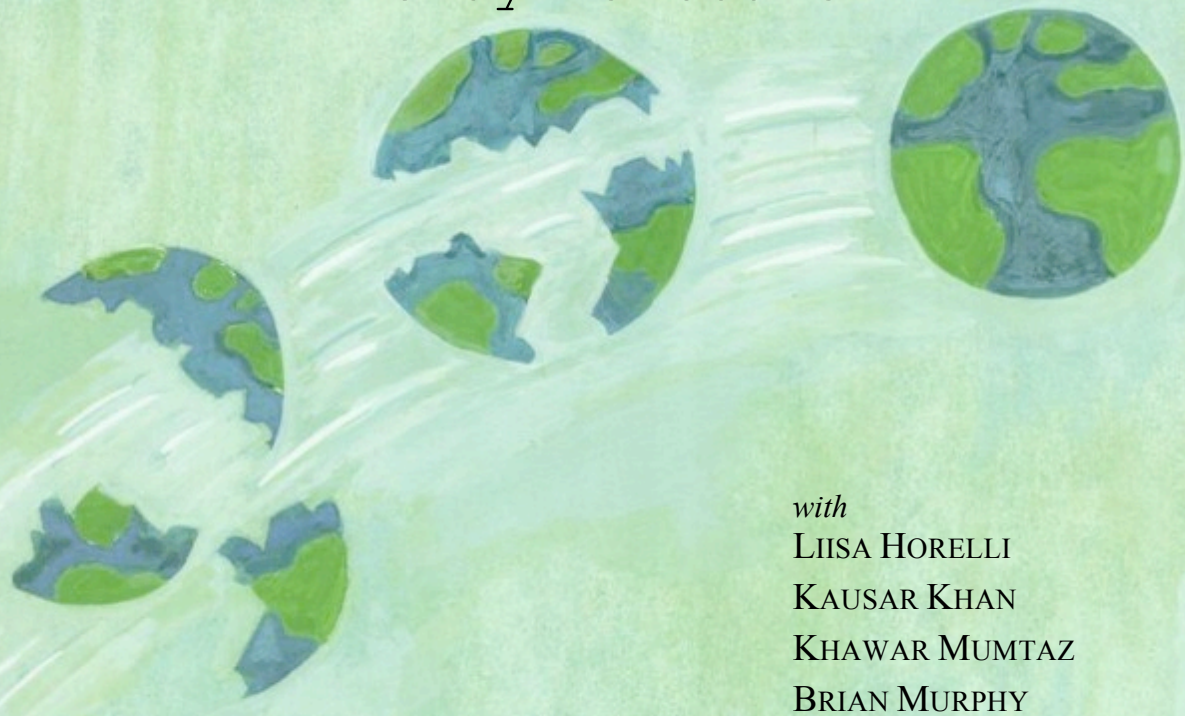

GTI Paper Series
Frontiers of a Great Transition
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Feminist Praxis:
Women's Transnational and Place Base Struggles for Change

The *Great Transition* Vision Engaging with Feminist Praxis

In this paper, we argue that feminist analysis and experience is critical to the vision of a *Great Transition*.* Our paper is built from our experiences as people mobilizing to change discriminatory power relations between the genders in struggles for social, economic, and sustainable development. A feminist perspective has two major implications for a *Great Transition* vision. First, central to the vision must be ending all forms of discrimination against women and, specifically, those forms that impede women's human rights and foster sexual and gender-based violence. Second, we need to forge a holistic analysis that acknowledges and builds on the multiple struggles of women for sustainable natural resource management, social and economic justice, rights to water and land, etc. Our paper is grounded methodologically in what we call feminist praxis—the interplay of feminist ideas and practice—in shaping a vision for the future that can achieve these ambitious goals. A feminist perspective is required to ensure that the *Great Transition* vision/pathway/strategy leads to a truly equal and just alternative global scenario.

While many global agreements on peace, women's rights, sustainable development, ending poverty, and fair trade already exist, our paper focuses on the practical requirements for these yet unrealized goals. To begin, we would need a profound set of changes in gender relations that would dismantle patriarchal power structures and bring a radical transition in personal, domestic, community, and public power relations. Such a transition would ameliorate the complex forms of psychological, sociological, cultural, and political discrimination that oppress women and men of different classes, races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. It would aim to reduce dramatically the grim predominance of political injustice and economic poverty among women and men and the many forms of violence against women and men. Such a radical transition would build from a feminist vision that fights for a common standard of equality and dignity for all, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, race, or class. It would in the process acknowledge that patriarchy is disempowering and disabling for men and that its dismantling would give rise to new forms of gender identities (including transgender identities moving beyond the hegemonic heterosexual norm). In sum, a great transition in human affairs and systems needs gender-aware women and men† as a critical mass at the heart of the initiative.

Our paper builds on a plethora of feminist experiences and analyses around the world in diverse disciplines and in myriad places and spaces. Our main entry points are our own experiences as feminist activists living in Europe, the Americas, East Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific who are engaged in international movements on environment, women, and social justice that work towards cultural, social, and economic transformation. Our

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* The vision is described in *Great Transition: the Promise and Lure of the Times Ahead* (Raskin et al., 2002). See also the other papers in this series.

† There are also trans-intersexed people who need to be included in feminist analysis and the process of advancing a *Great Transition*. Thank you to Bernedette Muthien from Engender for this comment and others that push the analysis to be much more conscious of sexualities and transgender issues.

contribution may read a little differently than the other papers in this series. We have sought to avoid rhetoric, but some of this no doubt remains, as we are activists who perhaps find it more natural to advocate than prepare scholarly texts. We have learnt that there is both great interest and wariness around bringing a more self-conscious feminist voice to the *Great Transition* path. We have tried, in making our paper more digestible, to give indications of how a feminist awareness can contribute to all the issues discussed in the *Great Transition Initiative* (GTI) Paper Series. But we still feel that strategically we are required to speak up as feminists, experimental in our approach and language. We need to show how the different oppressions have to be rooted out, understood, and changed. So we are writing as feminists of different colors, ethnicities, histories, sexual identities and orientations, and intellectual backgrounds who are contributing to the transition (and it may show in our language).

In this paper, we explore first the concept of feminism, then look at the context in which feminism is being practiced by women's movements around the world. We then present the *women and politics of place framework* as one analytical approach that can inform our understanding of the many women's networks that are to be engaged in the *Great Transition*. Finally we propose our ideas for a feminist vision for the future that can build from realpolitik and feminist struggles for change.

Global Feminism?

Many feminisms have emerged from what is now called the second wave of feminism, with roots in the 1960s. We begin from the premise that feminism is clearly not a monolith belonging to one culture, time, or place, but includes many experiences and analyses. The multiple dimensions of women's oppression, as well as the diversity of experiences among us, inform our collective vision for change. Most importantly, we have to acknowledge the variety of feminisms coming from women of the global South who have experienced gender discrimination along with racism and colonialism.

We are grounded, in particular, in the work of women who have been engaged in local feminisms. These are women's groups who are working at the local level to change different forms of discrimination against women, for example, lobbying for a higher minimum age for marriage, for services that ensure protection against rape, for available and safe contraception, for access to good medical treatment, for safe drinking water, for land rights, for fair treatment in the workforce, and for better livelihood conditions. At the same time, we connect with women who are linking to the wider global women's movement. It is important to stress that there is no rigidly defined global women's movement or global feminism. This point is made time and again by women writing about feminism and women's movements today. For example, in her introduction to *The Global Women's Movement*, Peggy Antrobus states that it is a movement "formed out of many movements shaped in local struggles and brought together in the context of global opportunities and challenges … as women discover commonalities and come to a better understanding of how the social relations of gender are implicated in the systemic crises" (Antrobus, 2004).

We are therefore careful not to claim there exists something called a global feminism; rather, we are reflecting on lessons learned from the knowledge and practices that have flourished in women's movement in all parts of the world. As Amitra Basu states, these

women's movements "differ radically [and] women activists often diverge among themselves and with each other on what feminism is" (Basu, 1995).

We would situate ourselves in this variety of feminisms and women's movements, as activist researchers who contribute to women's movements in our own countries and communities and who, in seeking more effective political, cultural, economic, and social change, have linked with other women's organizations globally. We work both inside venues of UN conferences and within alternative gatherings for "another world" in the World Social Forums, exchanging strategies at the different levels where we politically engage.

Our focus as feminists is on how gender relations are shaped by the forms of oppression that history has bequeathed to us, including imperialism—in former colonial contexts as well as in current contexts of continuing inequalities between the global North and South and the hegemonic tendencies of dominant global cultures. The impact of dominant paradigms emanating from and imposed by the centers of global power are critical dimensions of the lived realities of women in the South and women living in marginalized places in the North, be they feminists or not. Any initiative for an alternative global vision must acknowledge and confront these diverse realities of women's oppressions under various forms of patriarchy; in particular, the contribution of African and other women from the global South to the international feminist praxis must be recognized.

In this context, we are defining feminism as not only the political focus of women's movements to change women's multifarious oppressions, be they in the global South or North, but also to include political analysis, vision, and practice that addresses the power relations between and among women and men in different cultural, economic, and political contexts. Gender analysis is the analysis of the relations among women, among men, and between men and women, relations that are imbued also with differences of ethnicity, class, caste, age, sexual orientation, and race. We see feminist analysis as helping to untangle gendered social relations of power that both join and separate all of us in different ways in different cultures and societies. Issues of age, sexual identities, sexual orientations, cultural, and class backgrounds all inform gender relations and therefore how we live our daily lives and operate in different social movements.

In the *Great Transition* context, we are interested in using a consciously politicized gender analysis to understand a number of questions. How do women and men take different roles and how do they relate in environmental, peace, and social movements? What is the experience of women as opposed to men in these movements around the world? Are they shoulder to shoulder in shared decisions and actions? Or are women struggling against male-dominated decision-making patterns in social and environmental movements at local and larger levels? How are masculine and feminine roles as fluid identities translated and changed in such political processes? How do questions of racism, ethnicity, sexuality, sexual orientation, and complex gender identities enter into social movement and environmental politics and practices? How do feminists engage in ecological, sustainable development debates, struggles over natural resources, land rights, and the politics of peace and security? How do we understand gender difference in our conception of environment, society, and the various forms of economies (market, home, informal, community, etc.)? While we cannot answer these complex issues in the confines of this paper, we hope to begin the process.

It is not just women who are limited by today's patriarchal dominant power structures, but also men, so their gender oppression must also be fundamentally transformed. Gender is a continuum rather than a simple dichotomy—women vs. men—thus a feminist *Great Transition* challenges gender essentialism tied to conventional sex roles and gender defined as biology. The *Great Transition* must emphasize inclusiveness and diversity, and the criteria of "one common standard of equality and dignity for all persons regardless of gender, race, or class" (Dworkin, 1987).

Feminism is about women's movements, but not only about women's movements (and not all women's movements are feminist—to the contrary). Feminism is not only about "female" issues, but about women's issues as human beings, as persons, citizens, and social and political actors, inclusive of but also transcendent of (essentialist) gender-defined/gender-assigned roles. In this sense, feminism is about human issues, issues that are shared in common cause with men, though men and women have very different political, social, and economic identities and positions in patriarchies that continually work to maintain women's subordination. In this, men are also caught within patriarchal hierarchies; indeed, some would even say that men were early feminists in some national struggles (for example in South Asia), although others would challenge that identity and see those men as exceptional, raising profound questions about men's engagement in feminist struggles. We see the validity of working with men in relation to their own engagement and understanding of patriarchy and struggle to move beyond dominant masculinities and shift oppressive gender relations. Feminism means recognizing that gender identities are hybrid, fluid, and changing. We need to move from conceptualizing a binary gender divide of men/women to a pursuit of diversity and difference among and between men and women. This implies a fundamental shift in gender relations—ideological, economic, and political.

As we move towards a *Great Transition*, we need to develop a gender consciousness that underscores the power dimension defining gender relations and its further manifestations through class/caste/tribal/formal/informal social structures. Feminists stand against the monopoly of power in the hands of the males within the family and in society (and sometimes by females who have this power delegated to them by males). Feminists seek to create opportunities for women to renegotiate public as well as private space and relationships based on justice and equity.

The concept of equity helps highlight the differences that must be overcome if justice is to be ushered into our world. It enables and legitimizes the engagement of poor communities, in particular, the process of critical reflection and analysis that is the preparation for influencing and changing the factors that create oppression, and thereby changing the structures of oppression. Of course, such efforts are not without risks and dangers, hence the pace of such efforts needs to be deliberate and cautious. But a feminist approach to change from a justice and equity perspective asks that the practice of the ideas that guide the transition not leave poor communities behind.

Patterns of gender relations and prescribed roles are so deeply socialized in our consciousness that it is easy to slip back into them even when we have struggled and stepped out of them. In a male-dominated world, the models available in political, economic, and other decision-making fields are all male crafted. Hence, when women reach powerful positions, they tend to follow the established male roles. Similarly, where special spaces are created to bring women into the mainstream, such as the provision of

reserved seats in parliament, these measures do not automatically lead to a real role for women in decision-making. At the same time it is also true that the sensibilities that women bring to a movement—be it environmental, peace, or any other—are informed by their lived experience of roles that have been defined by gender constructs. In practice, it is seen that women in movements often take on responsibilities that transcend their expected roles; however, very seldom does the involvement lead to greater inclusiveness in decision-making.

Take for example the recent peasant movement in the Pakistan province of Punjab where women stormed police stations and attacked police pickets for the release of their male leaders. Their unprecedented action demonstrated new confidence but did not translate into equal relations in their domestic lives, or a say in the movement's strategizing. In many instances, women themselves feel they are not ready for a drastic change in norms. Essentially, for women to be taken seriously and their voice to be heard requires multiple transformations of the imaginations of both males and females, as well as transformations of social structures and commitments to justice and equity.

Our group has been searching for ways to bring together an understanding of how women mobilize to end multiple discriminations at local and global levels in a world that is dominated by the threats, as well as the possibilities, of globalization. Some of us have been involved in an international interdisciplinary research project on Women and the Politics of Place (WPP) that has looked at women, globalization, and place-based politics. The aim of the project was to document how women—in place—are living their lives at different levels of resistance and creativity in the face of what is often perceived as overwhelming, abstract global forces. The term "place" was used as a way to ground discussions in the actual places where women are mobilizing for change and to break down the concept of the global. The project was interested in alternative ways of understanding globalization. It looked at women's contributions to the many counter-discourses of the economy, body, and environment that represent some of the alternative strands of thinking and practice in the feminist, socialist, cooperative, and local sustainability movements around the world.

The project gave the space for women and men of different cultures, disciplines, and ages interested in place-based politics to work together on some of the underlying theoretical issues that linked place, women, body politics, environment, community, activism, and alternative globalization. The 1998 debate between the coordinators of the project, Wendy Harcourt and Arturo Escobar, during a discussion about how to bring together feminist and ecological politics and theory, along with the findings of the project were published as a book (Harcourt and Escobar, 2005). The framework that was developed in that process highlights the three domains (body, environment, economy) where women have been engaged in mobilizing for change. The project suggests that the women's movement's intellectual and political activity is built on the different embodied, ecological, and economic experiences of women's place-based mobilizations. The aim of women's movements working in place is to produce politically and practically new possibilities for women's experience of body, environment, and economy. The project indicated there are many ideas and practices by women around the world that are already moving towards a *Great Transition*. In the next section of the paper, we explore the WPP framework as a contribution to the feminist praxis with the *Great Transition* as it moves

forward to challenge the patriarchal narrative's focus on 'the global' that characterizes neoliberal globalization today.

Women and the Politics of Place (WPP)

The WPP framework emphasizes that in our collective strategy for transition, we have to build up movements and solidarity across gender, class, age, sexualities, race, and ethnicities. In this process, we need to recognize that good analysis alone is not enough. Our ambition is to integrate a conceptual discourse with the realities of how movements are to be built. Movements are often spontaneous, such as the peasant movement in Pakistan described earlier, but if pre-planned movements are to be initiated, then strategies for movement building also need to be highlighted and their practices promoted. Movements are sustained also by values; process must reflect the goals of the movement. If the goal is justice and peace, then the means cannot be unjust and violent. Feminism and feminist practice illustrate how to work together in a process that even in its unfolding produces the conditions for new practices and new politics.*

The WPP framework is based on an analysis of political movements (women's movements and women working in economic and social justice movements, including those active in the World Social Forum processes). WPP documents how women understand place in multiple ways as their body, home, local environs, and community, the places that women are motivated to defend, define, and own politically.

From experiences in Papua New Guinea, Eastern Africa, Pakistan, the Dominican Republic, the Colombian Pacific, Canada, India, South East Asia, the United States, Finland, Mexico, Europe, Palestine, and the Middle East, WPP shows how women in their various struggles are defending, transforming, redefining, and re-creating place in locations where their journeys have taken them. In a globalized world, place can be experienced in many different ways: in a locality where people are born or to which they migrate; in the spaces where political negotiations are undertaken, such as in the UN; or in networks formed through cyberspace. The thesis of WPP is "as women are mobilizing for change, they are creating a new form of politics". This type of politics challenges dominant social, cultural, and economic trends that are defining women's rights, access to resources, employment, and bodily security at regional, national, and global levels.

Analytically, WPP exposes how patriarchal institutions disempower women, as well as men who are not dominant within the system. This disempowerment includes established academic frameworks (for instance, medical science, mainstream economics, and studies on globalization and empire). Traditional academic analysis and the policy that is often advised by prominent academics (take the role of Jeffrey Sachs as one extreme example) can fail to highlight women's positions. It neglects their struggles in different communities and identities, including their fight against definitions of self and behavior defined by dominant patriarchal social, cultural, and sexual norms. Nor does most mainstream analysis take into account the institutionalized discrimination in mainstream politics. Such analysis thus obscures, even reinforces the disempowerment of women. Patriarchy varies from place to place, but the unequal relations of power between men

* There is a very intense discussion about horizontal networking and movement building in the World Social Forum. See the articles published in *Development* vol. 48 no. 2 "Movement of Movements" June 2004 for the elaboration of this debate that essentially challenges hierarchal structures and argues for participative processes as the way to create "another world".

and women, as well as among women and among men, are always present. In focusing on the stories of women in place-based movements who are resisting expression of patriarchy and economic globalization, WPP aims to show how women engage creatively with globalization in many ways.

WPP challenges the assumption that women's rights are solely about women as victims of social and economic inequalities and issues, violence against women, sexual discrimination, etc. By focusing on the "woman as victim", gender relations are reduced to a marginal micro-level concern. This victim perspective obfuscates gender relations in global struggles around macro policies that determine economic, social, political, and institutional inequalities. By bringing to the fore women's place-based struggles, WPP challenges the policy makers, scholars, and non-governmental organizations that look at globalization through what we may call "globalocentric" frameworks. In these dominant narratives, the agents of transformation are markets, corporations, big governments of the global North, the global economy, financial capital, and new technologies. While these are indeed real forces transforming the world, in these globalocentric perspectives there is little that people in localities can do. In the conventional form of market-driven globalization, places, communities, and regions have to adapt or perish. The strategies of local and regional development must be devised with the aim of integrating into the global economy according to this or that comparative advantage. Given worldwide circumstances of unequal power, this often means that in order to find their "competitive niche", places and communities are forced to accept integration into an exploitative global economic system that affects women and their bodies, communities, livelihoods, and the environment in often virulent and unseen ways.

WPP shows how innovative strategies of women focusing on their health, livelihood, home, and rights in the face of global capital are invisible also in leftist narratives where what counts most are empire, capital, and modernity. Such analyses undermine and devalue place-based politics and, in particular, make invisible women's struggles around body politics.

WPP asks that we see anew the multiple forms that political struggles around the body, environment, and economy take on today, particularly those that challenge neoliberal globalization. Place-based struggles reveal that people do not act as victims but rather as conscious agents that own the integrity of their lived bodily conditions (including health, sexuality, right to rest, etc.) and their environments, and act like economic subjects through practices that are often quite different from the mainstream.

WPP is a framework for thinking about the politics of place that theorizes globalization as not an abstract entity happening out there, but as a series of economic, political, and social changes that are happening in local environments that are then linking up to form broader coalitions, networks, and points of intersection in their mobilization for change. Many movements of today, from the Zapatista to the Italian alternative globalization movements, can be described as enacting a new form of "place-based globalism". There are two aspects to this formulation. On the one hand, most of today's movements can be described as place-based yet transnationalized struggles (resisting locally the interventions of transnational corporations, for example); on the other, they are engaged in a new kind of politics that often emphasize the local, the cultural, the present, and the possibilities of alternative ways of organizing society. For these movements, not only the content but also the process and the very form of politics are of consequence. In some

ways at least, this combination of features suggests a certain feminist understanding of being, doing, politics, and "globality" (i.e., global awareness, consciousness, identity). The sense of globality one sees emerging out of many of the so-called global movements is one that does not search for universal solutions no matter how alternative, but one that seeks to preserve heterogeneity and diversity even as, and precisely through, new kinds of alliances and networking.

There are many thousands of women's networks that have entered into diverse international agenda-setting arenas from their own regional, local, and place-based perspectives and who, in various self-defined ways, are engaging in political and social transformation that the WPP seeks to describe. They come from environmental, economic, health, alternative economic, and rights-based movements. We illustrate this with some examples from the WPP narratives.

For the past twenty years, Nordic women have been conducting place-based politics through the creation of networks for social cohesion with significant impact on diverse economies and the infrastructures of daily life. They have, for example, set up youth centers, women's shelters, community libraries, support for local crafts, and sustainable food and environmental conservation networks. Networking for social cohesion derives its meaning from the opposition to the currently dominant principle of competition among the "big players" (enterprises, public institutions, financial agents). It also gains meaning from the collaborative construction of infrastructures of daily life and economic activity that might enable supportive cultures, which enhance the survival of those groups that are dependent on their locality or region.

WPP implies a new vision of politics that includes projects that are embedded, contextualized, and localized, but also linked and networked. In fact, it is a "politics of becoming", which presupposes the application of innovative, hybrid strategies. The work to create these place-based networks consists of the following:

- The construction of motivating visionary narratives in which women from different contexts emerge as agents of their everyday lives who pursue social justice and conviviality (living in harmony together). The spheres of the women's identities stretch from the local to the global.

- The adoption of strategies that build on multiple local knowledges and produce a set of enabling tools and techniques that can nurture community-based economies and ways of living.

- The recognition of the role of conflicts and power issues inherent in women's place-based politics.

Another example is the Chiapas women's call for their rights, which resulted in an important women's communiqué "the right to rest" (the women's rights to bodily security, freedom from rape, freedom from exploitation, freedom from beating in the home, and freedom from forced marriage). This call for rights in the Zapatista movement was eliminated by the need for the Chiapas male leaders to see women as the repositories of their struggle and of indigenous culture (Belausteguigoitia, 2004). Women are mourners, mothers, caretakers, and food providers. Only the demands that reflect those

roles (for crèches, for schools, for bakeries) are given public voice in the official communiqués. The right to be themselves, to have time and space to think, to have freedom from rape, to "be" independently from national and communal identities is silenced. Their voices are replaced by pictures of women mourning the dead or confronting the soldiers. Their demands as autonomous women are not recognized as part of the revolution or what the Zapatistas want to share with their supporters around the world. In the formation of one of the most celebrated cyber-connected struggles of indigenous peoples to challenge the capitalist state, women are relegated to representations of their culture and the violence and oppression they experience as women is sidelined.

The question remains why women's marginalization inside and outside their communities is not considered an element of the interconnectedness of oppressions and of the relational asymmetries of power interactions. The leaders of the Chiapas Rebellion defy the state development project and dominating power of economic globalization. In the process they reach out to groups around the world, inspiring many to see in their activities the creation of new sites of power. We should heed the warning from the Chiapas women that the patriarchal confining of women to the private realm and to the role of representations of culture must to be tackled in the *Great Transition*.

Another example of women working in place while using the possibilities of globalization is that of the international solidarity network, Women Living Under Muslim Laws. The network connects not only women living in Muslim states but also those in secular societies where Islam is expanding, women from immigrant Muslim populations, and women to whom Muslim laws apply no matter where they are physically located. The network, initiated in 1984 to protest the denial of women's rights in the name of Islam and to "unmask the political motives behind this denial of rights and challenge the alleged sacredness of the dictates under which women were being oppressed", has evolved over the years. Its goals include information exchange, sharing of analysis, support of solidarity actions, and challenging denial of rights, thus enabling women from "Muslim countries and communities to deepen our understanding of the factors that shape our lives, thereby strengthening our strategies for initiating change" (WLUML, 2003). Among other things, the network explodes the myth of a homogenous Muslim reality and highlights the diversity of the Muslim world where often the denial of rights have social, customary, or political underpinnings. The network has successfully provided support for local actions against women's human right violations in countries across the globe.

In Pakistan, the Women's Action Forum (WAF) has been the face of the feminist movement since 1981. Its turning point was in understanding itself as an autonomous entity de-linked from other institutionalized identities (political parties, trade unions, etc.). In the first decade of its existence, it succeeded in putting women's issues on the agenda—no political party manifesto was complete without mentioning women's rights. It also sparked a broad discussion that addressed women's status in society, their right to work and political participation, the division between public and private spaces, and women as heads of households. By the mid-1990s, WAF had become a part of the civil liberties, minority rights, anti-nuclear, anti-big dam, and environmental movement. It strove to bring the feminist perspective to these movements. While it has succeeded in sustaining a heated discussion on women's rights and equality, a range of affirmative actions, and a policy shift towards inclusiveness, it also faces the very real constraints of

feudal mindsets, religious extremism, unequal social structures, and the capturing of institutional spaces by the elite. The struggle for a sea change will be a long one. Yet each struggle to right a wrong, to place women's issues on the official agenda of social movements, raises the threshold of understanding the complexities and devising strategies.

The Pakistan experience demonstrates that it is imperative to build alliances with those struggling for social justice; to participate in international processes and global movements; to fine tune a multi-pronged strategy of challenging measures that push women into greater poverty and insecurity; to use every opportunity of influencing government, corporations, and donors; to bring accountability and transparency in politics and democracy; and to help women discover their own agency.

The place-based connections between the local and the global are central to the nexus of gender, environment, and conflict that international women's rights networks such as the Women's Environment and Development Organization are striving to put on the global policy agenda (WEDO, 2005). Working with the women at the community level who have gained the most experience—often at great cost—with the multiple effects of gender discrimination, poverty, environmental damage, and conflict, WEDO seeks to build on and document their experience on the ground to promote an alternative approach to the growing majority of environment-related conflicts that recognizes the central role of women at the local level in conflict prevention, resolution, and reconstruction.

Feminists Contributing to Global Transformations

Our engagement with these different women's movements and our reflections on that engagement shape our hopes and concern for the *Great Transition*. One of our group explained her experience:

> My experience is that feminist women are central to and intrinsic to almost all progressive "cause-related" activist struggles today, and bring their experience and analysis in a profound way to these struggles. I think we should make this visible. My premise is that without this experience and methodology and analysis, these movements would flounder even more than they/we currently do.

The dialogue on the global future can promote a vision that recognizes women's engagement and leadership in change. Women have always been pushing for change whether through their ideas or leadership in mobilizations, or by cooking and caring for the men who are fronting the change. By acknowledging our shared histories, we can, within the *Great Transition,* provide a space where feminists can dialogue with concerned others to bring about change and work to collectively adopt and adapt a gender consciousness.

Experience shows this is not easy. So many times in the last decades feminist concerns about gender oppression and bias in knowledge production, the economy, politics, culture, and society have been brushed aside. In all facets of politics—be they in academe, government, business, policy environments, or social movement arenas—feminists are continually called upon not only to lobby and state their case, but also to keep ever vigilant, or gains made are swiftly lost.

In the following, we discuss three major areas where women's movements' energies have been engaged in the last years: the development movement advocating that gender analysis is brought into the UN international conferences, treaties, and aid projects (a process popularly called gender mainstreaming); the "cyber revolution", with women engaging in the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) for political networking; and the global social justice movements, specifically the World Social Forum (WSF) as a focal point for many of the most important transnational contemporary social justice movements.

Mainstreaming gender

The gender and development discourse since the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing has sought ways to bring gender into development policy and to promote equality between the sexes. Gender mainstreaming has been seen by some as a transformative strategy for "the (re)organization, improvement, development, and evaluation of policy processes so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all policies at all levels and all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy making and in practice" (Council of Europe, 1998).

Gender mainstreaming is challenging because the contexts of everyday life are increasingly complex. Women are often obliged to struggle against triple domination—Eurocentric conceptions of the nation, ethnic subordination, and patriarchal body politics. A prime example is the case of the previously discussed Zapatista women. In addition, many differences exist among women because of class, age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Thus, the diversity that is a richness also makes it challenging to define what the shared issues are. Gender mainstreaming is also proving to be a difficult strategy because of the lack of commitment of those responsible for its implementation and internalization at all levels. Nationalist and patriarchal mindsets along with other ethnic/sectarian differences are major obstacles. Feminists and women's rights activists are constantly criticized for damaging the "image" of their countries by raising issues of violence against women and other forms of gender discrimination in global forums. As feminists, we need to maintain a focus on how to create enabling conditions for strengthening women's agency as they define, struggle, and negotiate for their place in the social, cultural, and political system, both public and private.

The conventional development movement has, in the process of gender mainstreaming, moved away from "justice" as its primary focus and has begun to emphasize—indeed, market—efficiency and management, with an increasingly prescriptive focus on poverty. The development discourse increasingly appropriates women's complex experiences and emphasizes women merely as poor victims who need technological support, capacity-building, and training, rather than defining them as agents of their own development. In this process of appropriation, there is also an invidious conflation of "women", with "family" and "children", imposing a universal assumption equating the sphere of women with the domestic sphere and obscuring women's lives and roles in other spheres where they also live and act. The "livelihood" analysis that was also part of the development discourse of the 1990s goes beyond simple conventional economics and looks at the broader experience of people, including women, in managing their lives and communities as creative agents, indeed, as "scientists". But even the livelihood analysis fails to address the essentialization of women within the domestic realm, as a biological category, rather

than as human beings, diverse, dynamic, and (at the very least) equally complex in their interaction with the world as men. Development discourse in relation to gender and women's issues has been translated into instrumentalist approaches that boil down to "the modernization of exploitation"—that is, approaches aiming at exploiting women's labor more efficiently.

Consider the long UN process of negotiating agreements on women's issues through thousands of consultations and engagements of members of women's groups. The end result has been the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that emerged out of the Millennium Declaration in 2000. The MDGs have the overall goal to halve global poverty by the year 2015 and to make donor countries more accountable through living up to all the promises of the UN Conferences. Women's empowerment is measured in Goal three by the level of girls' primary and secondary education and another indicator aimed to measure the reduction of maternal mortality. For the rest of the MDGs, gender is stated as a cross-cutting theme, like health systems and human rights, though none of these have clear indicators. Many of the major issues such as sexuality, reproductive rights, health, and violence against women, which the women's movement pushed so hard to be on the global development agenda, are missing. They were discussed in the process leading to the MDGs, but the actual goals fail to mention them. Because of their silo vision, the MDGs fail to address structural imbalances, including discrepancies between males and females that are at the root of poverty, the eradication of which is the ultimate goal of MDGs.

Carol Barton, a leading New York-based advocate of gender and economic justice during the 1990s, noted,

> Women's movements that have been engaged in the United Nations at all levels around the UN Conferences of the 1990s … approach the MDGs with mixed feelings …. [T]here is great concern that they sideline key gains made in Beijing, Cairo, and other UN Conferences, set a minimalist agenda, and fail to integrate gender perspectives (Barton, 2005).

When the discursive agenda is "women", much is said and heralded, but when the realpolitik of actual international action is engaged at the political level, the language and frameworks move to another level of abstraction, the specificity is lost (indeed, obscured), and the unique experience and aspirations of women is subsumed within such general categories as the poor, peasants, refugees, and other "target" populations as defined by governments and aid agencies. The global political talk is of responding to "communities" as though communities were homogenous and without fundamental distinctions, such as gender and generation. ("Communities" becomes a euphemism referring to "grassroots" and women's voluntary action, instead of "cities" or "local governments" with legally binding governance systems, such as democratic representation and taxation.) They speak of what the community "wants", obscuring that the gatekeepers and "leaders" of the community who determine and express "what the community wants" almost always are men. And critically, international development interventions treat people as economic units or collectivities ("economic man") and ignore all other qualities, many of which are at least as important as "economics" in defining and determining people's real lived lives and the opportunities and prospects of their individual and collective future.

The MDG process reflects the patriarchal realpolitik under which women live and which the *Great Transition* vision needs to address. One of our group living in Pakistan commented,

> Nothing could be starker than government "double-speak" on policies that our states commit themselves to in international arenas and then back paddle when it comes to implementation. One example from Pakistan is that of ratification of CEDAW (Convention to Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination against Women) which is a binding convention and the government is committed to repeal/amend laws that discriminate against women but has continued to drag its feet since it was signed in 1996, largely for reasons of political expediency and deep-rooted lack of belief in equality of men and women and, in this particular case, of religious minorities, too.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

Women's use of ICTs is another example of where women are politically engaged in transformation with mixed results because root gender bias is not addressed. The world of policy and decision-making on telecommunications and other areas affecting access and use of cyberspace is proving difficult ground for feminists. The fact remains that the majority of the world's women and men are poor, illiterate, and cannot hope to have access to the cyber world. The digital divide between the elite in the global North and South and the poor, the majority of whom live in the global South, remains. There continues to be little awareness of the different uses of the Internet by men and women in varied cultural contexts. If our goal is to crystallize women's agency, then the challenge is to make this tool of easy communication accessible to the most disadvantaged women for their own mobilization and networking. In the global South, we find women's proficiency in ICTs being channeled into call centers relocated from the developed world in order to cut costs for big companies.

The difficulty of addressing these challenges is compounded by our continued lack of knowledge of digital capitalism—from who owns sites to the creation of elite spaces, largely male and executive, that exclude others in order to keep high-level knowledge to themselves. The worlds of Microsoft, high finance, and telecommunications business are not the spaces in which women or those pushing an alternative agenda easily find a voice, let alone a decision-making position or the wherewithal to challenge and change. Northern-based consumers who use the Internet for much of leisure and purchasing are largely where the mainstream ICTs interest and investment lies. There is still a crying need to advocate for much more gender-aware and socially aware communication policy at the top levels.

Feminists are still considering how cyberspace provides women with a new terrain to wage old struggles. In the early 1990s, we felt we were hovering on a communication revolution, indeed one that made visions such as the *Great Transition* seem possible. Feminist groups were quick to think how they could make it their revolution—adapt it as a tool that could move agendas forward beyond the local space, yet operate within that space. If and when women could overcome the inequality of access, they could start using ICTs. And use them to overcome inequality, food insecurity, illiteracy, and gender-based violence.

ICTs have undoubtedly made feminist and other social movements' communication much easier; they have shifted the spaces and ways in which we interact, even if the same power/knowledge nexus remains. We are learning how to employ it for our struggles rather than being manipulated by it. There are many examples of active cyberfeminism operating in the international arena, consciously using cyberspace in a transformation process. One example of feminists creating an international cyberspace for transformation is the Feminist Task Force of G-CAP (Global Call to Action against Poverty, 2006). The Feminist Task Force seeks to bring a gender analysis to all of G-CAP's analysis and efforts. In doing so, they link macro-economic concerns and gender justice concerns, including sexual and reproductive rights (Global Call to Action Against Poverty, 2005). Another example is the "femzines" (on-line feminist magazines). For instance, "Digital Future", a bilingual feminist quarterly produced by an international team of feminist writers (see www.iiav.nl), reported from the World Social Forum through a number of feminist zines and websites, including www.penelopes.org/anglais and www.enawa.org.

World Social Forum (WSF)

The last area we examine is the WSF, a process that has been gathering together civil society movements focused on resistance to the big international institutions. Its major demands are the cancellation of the debt and the rejection of the IMF interventions. The WSF forms part of the global justice movement that has grown immensely since the late 1990s. The early years of this century have seen the massive international mobilizations against the war in Iraq and a growing global protest against the George W. Bush administration's "war on terror" and aggressive "nation-building" intervention that imposes an economic and political blueprint largely designed by the multilateral financial institutions in Washington backed by military and strategic implementation.

Yet even in the WSF, the most known and progressive forums for global transition, many feminists are concerned it is failing to engage with the core issues of the women's movement. Potentially, the "movement of movements" creates the space for the global progressive women's movement to broaden the spectrum of feminist action from the struggles for the democratization of gender relations to struggles against racism, militarism, homophobias, economic injustice, environmental degradation, and more. It should open the space for culturally subverted agendas, including those of sexuality and equity, to be included as an integral component of the broader movement for economic justice and the deepening of democracy. However, feminists are still struggling to ensure that the WSF overcomes the rigid separation between economy, politics, society, culture, and subjectivity.

The challenge is to include discussions and actions that understand gender relations as cross-cutting in the many democratic, economic, political, and cultural struggles that women are waging alongside men. Feminists are pushing towards new, more inclusive visions where the impact of neoliberalism is understood not only in relation to economic rights but also in relation to the gender dimensions of social change and cultural struggles over meanings, including feminist struggles around sexuality and equity. Virginia Vargas, a contributor of the WSF movement from Peru, explained the challenge:

> Another world will not be possible without a different kind of economy, and another economy will not be possible without a different kind of democracy. And another kind of democracy will not be possible without a personal, subjective revolution on the part of women and men, without an active recognition of our diversity and unless we work together in order to face this collective challenge. It is here where feminists lead the fight for democracy, in addition to the fight against the neo-liberal capitalist system and against militarization and war. The urgent battle against today's patriarchal system is to open the way for recognition of sexual diversity, for reproduction by choice instead of by obligation, to welcome the existence of different types of families, to value the reproductive economy, and the importance of democratization on various fronts — in the world, in countries, at home and in the bedroom.

Feminist Praxis and Vision for the Future

Given all that is going on, how can the *Great Transition* take into account feminist analysis and practice when establishing a multifaceted transition which transforms the dominant neoliberal and capitalist political and economic interests of today's existing social order? WPP is useful to consider as an entry point, beginning from feminisms rooted in different national and regional perspectives and following the links to a transnational feminist movement. WPP suggests a framework that takes into account the linkages among women and environmental and alternative globalization movements. In addition, WPP also aims to look at the relation of people, place, and nature. It seeks to understand how to build global perspectives based on changing economic and social realities in terms of place.

The WPP acknowledges that the concept of place has many dimensions. For a woman, the most immediate place where politics is played out is her body, followed by her home, neither of which can be mapped out in a geographical grid. The expanded notional places that have relevance for women (as for men) are village/neighborhood, city, country, and possibly the globe—all chartable on a map. Nations, states, and boundaries exist alongside relationships and connections among humans that transcend territories. There is constant tension and contradiction between the two. The network described above, along with other similar networks, mediates these tensions to some extent by providing support for common causes through constantly connecting the local to the global and vice versa. The concept of human rights as it has evolved to include all people's rights is founded on universal principles and should be equally applicable to all. However, important to remember is that the rights and responsibilities claimed by one should not be at the expense of the rights of another.

We then must then face the core concern of how the global women's rights movements can reflect "place-based" struggles of women in their communities and localities around their reproductive and sexual health, livelihood, home, and rights? How women at different levels of political engagement can connect across cultural, geopolitical, racial, and ethnic divides remains a dynamic process that is being played out. Fluidity through networking, resistances, innovations, and mobilizing around global events has limits, and it is clear that individuals often engage in many different political strategies, of which their contribution to the global women's rights movement is just a part. This is where a more nuanced sense of politics is required. Though challenging, if one is aware of how power is operating (through not just impositions and force but also through processes and

practices such as those around the UN and the global justice movement), then it is possible to strategically use sites of power by working within them in order to bring about change. However, knowledge about the different realities of those working inside dominant power structures and those working outside dominant power structures is crucial. Constant dialogue, debate, and openness to contradictions in the struggle are necessary in order to move forward. It is not always going to be necessary to bring local women such as the famous Zapatista Movement's indigenous women's leader Comandante Esther to the heart of state power (Belausteguigoitia, 2004) or seek to crown as Nobel laureates black women activists such as Wangari Maathai—these are effective strategies at the moment. But there are many other ways the global women's rights movement can move forward: through fluid resistance, strategic acknowledgement of its own power, awareness of what can work at what historical moment, and not looking to blueprints, but advocating for and understanding change as women's rights activists within diverse global political arenas.

In this struggle, major issues remain. How and when to connect politically to the mainstream? How to translate women's concerns across a wide range of issues without losing focus, relevance, integrity, direction, or purpose? How to build trust and shared knowledge across generations? Engagement with other social movements is clearly where some of the energy is taking the movement, but at the same time, there is also a move to reflect and build knowledge of the process failures and successes of the past years in order to guide the current directions.

In developing a *Great Transition* vision that can catalyze change, feminism can bring a wealth of experience and knowledge to other movements such as the environment, peace, and social justice movements. Feminist questions are about vision, but also about process and power relations. The process of formulating an alternative global vision needs to build on some of the creative political ways feminist networks are working now. It can learn from the transformative visions that women are creating in their own and other political processes.

The push for vision and change comes from many places. If we are talking about a "great" transition, we need to recognize and engage the changes at the peripheries, among rural and urban poor communities. A major challenge is for highly intellectual men and women (among whom we include ourselves) who are calling for mobilization to reach out to those on margins. The experience, wisdom, and strength of the women and men living in socially and economically marginal places who are mobilizing for justice, rights, and responsibilities cannot be glossed over. If transformation is to take place, then the intellectual discourse has to merge with those lives and practices. Otherwise, the *Great Transition* vision may risk flying in the sky like a beautiful kite with its strings severed from the ground. We need to ground sound intellectual analysis with people in practice so that those in the movement can use it to empower themselves and challenge the domain of intellect to respond to on-the-ground challenges. We need to ask how the poor women and men on the peripheries are to partake in the transition. We need to recognize these women's agency and we need to work with them in our efforts to bring about economic and social transformation. We need to push for the legitimacy of the rights of the poor and the marginalized women and men as part of our own push for transformation.

The vision of the *Great Transition* needs to resonate with those working in movements from the global South, particularly feminists in those social justice movements as well as

those engaged in women's rights movements. The *Great Transition* vision needs to find a way to ensure that our understanding of core values—solidarity, ecology, well-being, pluralism, and equity—is accessible and useful to those people engaged in place-based struggles on the ground. They are grappling with ways to understand and change profound inequalities within their home or community in starkly violent and poor environments. It is hard in our envisioning of the future to hear the voices of those who experience inequality everyday. Our understanding may be embedded in concepts of the economy, ecology, and solidarity. But when poor people start to speak of their experience and vision, they can sometimes feel greater resonance with simpler visions for change and equality. Consider, for example, the popular appeal of neoconservatism and religious fundamentalism in many parts of the world (of all religions). A shared vision of social justice and equity cannot be reached without working closely with women and men living inequities and injustice. The WPP framework and this paper aim to open up ways for the *Great Transition* to identify the politics of embodied inequalities so that our multi-colored, different length kite strings stay tethered to the ground. We (women and men with the education, access to technology, and lifestyle that allows the luxury and freedom to write) need to be working with our pluralities, listening to our diversities, bringing in those from the peripheries in order to form a just and fair future to go beyond what intellectuals envision as we speak mainly to each other and build together what, we contend, cannot be imagined today.

Our vision is grounded in what we see emerging among peoples' movements, specifically women's groups, that are responding to and shaping resistances to dominant neoliberal capitalist discourses. Such visions are centered on the "politics of place" concept we are exploring together. We are looking forward with hope to the destabilization of power and a renewal of thinking about what forms of institutions, governance, and democracy are needed. This reassessment should be based on the knowledge people's groups are building up about how to negotiate differences (gender, racial, economic, cultural) and the sense of the other. We are restructuring cultural meanings incredibly rapidly so that our sense of the other changes with each encounter. In terms of a feminist concern for gender equality and equity and women's empowerment, even in stating those concerns, we are layering what are distinct cultural positionings in diverse cultures with a new sense of what it means to be a gendered being. And at the same time, these encounters change our own sense of what being a feminist means. We can no longer talk of "cultural" feminism in reference to a recognition of diverse cultural and social backgrounds within feminism as predominantly white women did in the 1980s; there are now historically and politically strong black women's movements, which have been in fact taking a lead in many international settings since the late 1990s.

Envisaging the future becomes much more problematic because we are evolving new forms of politics along what the WPP calls localized power. At the same time, because of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and other global links, local networks are connected to what were once far flung places. So we are now, in terms of time and space, much closer to the "other".

To take just one example of a site of political organizing, consider the struggle for the autonomy and self-determination of women over their bodies. Highly difficult issues such as violence against women in peace and war, the fight against rape, sexual abuse, female

genital mutilation, sex workers' rights, women's security, sexual orientation, and life choice are no longer silent, "private" issues but are at the center of women's rights debates in various cultural and economic contexts. Women's strategies of resistance and struggles for self-autonomy are sometimes carried out in direct support of women who share similar experiences even when living in different geo-political spaces. We cannot easily compare the experience of violence across geographic, ethnic, and political divides, but it is clear that women work in strong solidarity. Women create a type of politics that is a very powerful emotive force. It holds out a promise for the future of security that women's groups are negotiating despite the backdrop for many of severe economic crisis, dire need, and violent conflict.

This politics is place-based—with the body being the first site or place for women's struggles for women's rights to choice, safety, and rest. Women's varied resistance to violence at all levels has created very innovative and important changes in women's lives, changing social, medical, health, and demographic scientific discourse and practices. A future where women are truly secure is something towards which we need to work. But we need to take multiple paths. There cannot be a blueprint for the achievement of women's security and rights and freedom. The paths to that future are extremely complex, tied to both horizontal and vertical power structures, and are propelled by local realities and issues that are not lived in any universal way. In fact, transformative pathways are emerging out of the resistance to essentialist discourses that are blind to all the differences among women. It is through solidarity and working with the resistances that we see the future taking place. We need visions that embrace the possibility that choice, access to resources, rights, integrity, and security can be found in diverse but appropriate forms for all women in the place where they chose to live and act for change.

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