

Negotiating the politics of difference in the project of feminist solidarity

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Abstract. The article is concerned with the constitutive tension between solidarity and difference in feminist practice. It is argued that while a ‘politics of difference’ has dogged efforts to build feminist solidarity across the boundaries of class, nation, ethnicity and religion, this does not refute the continuing importance of the concept of solidarity in understanding the dynamic interaction of agents in transnational political space. Drawing upon a number of illustrations from contemporary feminist practice, it is further argued that differences among women do not preclude solidarity. On the contrary, respect for difference is a necessary condition for forging solidarity. Moreover, conflict need not be divisive and can be creative in this process.

Introduction

This article is centrally concerned with the constitutive tension between solidarity and difference in feminist practice.¹ The need for a politics of solidarity founded on women’s ‘shared problems’ and the strategic necessity of speaking as ‘women’ has been and remains central to contemporary feminist practice. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a feminist practice that is not predicated on the basis of solidarity among women who display gender consciousness and who organise politically around gender issues that have the potential to unite women across boundaries of class, culture, religion and nation. And yet, conflicts and tensions have been manifest in the historical unfolding of the feminist movement.² While these conflicts and tensions have never wholly undermined the struggle to construct a collective identity, nor confounded the possibility of uniting around common causes, it is evident that at certain historical junctures forging and sustaining solidarity has been a problem for feminist activists.

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¹ bell hooks, ‘Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women’, *Feminist Review*, 23 (Summer 1986), p. 138.

² In the usage employed in this article the ‘feminist movement’ refers to a broad and heterogeneous network of NGOs and women’s groups who nevertheless are a ‘movement’ to the extent that they share a common aim of achieving social and political changes at the international and national/local level that will lead to a better position for women in specific societies. See M. Ferree and P. Y. Martin, *Feminist Organisations: Harvest of the New Woman’s Movement* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995).

In this article, I argue that while a ‘politics of difference’ has dogged efforts to build feminist solidarity across the boundaries of class, nation, ethnicity and religion, this does not refute the continuing importance of the concept of solidarity in understanding the dynamic interaction of agents in transnational political space. Differences among women do not necessarily preclude the possibility of solidarity. On the contrary, respect for difference is a necessary condition for forging solidarity. Moreover, while conflict is apt to be viewed as the negation of solidarity, conflict need not be divisive and can be creative. In the struggle to forge solidarity, conflict can serve to generate critical reflection upon what divides groups and individuals and so facilitate better understanding of where common ground might be constructed. I further suggest that transnational and postcolonial feminisms point to the emergence of strategic coalitions that link together multiple identities and that this is helpful in rethinking what ‘solidarity’ means in the context of feminist practice. To flesh out this argument, I draw upon a number of illustrations from contemporary feminist practice to demonstrate how respect for difference and recognition of the necessity for locally informed strategies of resistance, strengthens the prospects for forging solidarity across boundaries.

Sites of solidarity

There is no single definition of solidarity, nor commonly agreed understanding of the basis upon which solidarity is or might be secured or where solidarity might be grounded or located. Solidarity is often held to involve a social structure that identifies and characterises a group; the symbolic representation of the group itself; the common emotional orientation of members towards the group; and the contribution of resources by members of the group to a collective good.³ The achievement of solidarity has been held to depend upon the degree to which individuals are integrated into community life, which in turn is facilitated by furnishing individuals with a common set of values and symbols around which to mobilise.⁴ Solidarity might be founded on the basis of shared principles and/or generated by feelings of empathy towards other members of the group.

The tension between nationalist and feminist solidarities

Within International Relations, the ‘group’ or ‘common good’ has commonly been deemed to be the nation-state. Nationalism has served as the primary locus for political solidarity from the late eighteenth century onwards, providing a narrative which has allowed individuals to ‘imagine’ that they are part of a group called the national community.⁵ The ‘nation-state’ has not only served as the only significant

³ M. Noah, ‘The Problem of Solidarity: Theories and Models’, *Contemporary Sociology*, 30 (2001), p. 91.

⁴ B. Useem, ‘Solidarity Model, Breakdown Model and the Boston Anti-Bussing Movement’, *American Sociological Review*, 45:3 (1980), pp. 357–369.

⁵ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso Books, 1983).

form of sovereign political authority and political organisation, but also as the primary site of collective identity.

A core theme of feminist scholarship on nationalism and identity has been the tension between nationalist constructions of identity and community and constructions of collective identity that facilitate political mobilisation on the basis of gender. Nationalist conceptions of community are reinforced by social institutions and symbols of national honour and unity. The 'imagined community' of the nation-state is privileged as the single irreducible component of identity and human attachment through powerful representations of 'national interests' and through received narratives on identity and on political space and place (territory).

However, historically, the structure of political communities, including nation-states and national communities, has assumed gendered forms. Feminist scholarship on nationalisms and identities highlights the complex ways in which gender is deeply implicated in the carving out of political spaces, in the construction of identities and in the demarcation of the boundaries of community. Ideas about gender, sexuality and the family have been and continue to be of great symbolic import in the construction and reproduction of national identities and state boundaries and in ensuring the cultural continuity of specific communities.⁶ Mosse has suggested that the sense of belonging and attachment in nationalist discourse is actually centred on male bonding and, as such, has special affinities for male society. This special affinity for male society legitimises male domination over women.⁷ Women's bodies are controlled in the interests of delineating identities and reproducing boundaries. Thus, power relations are implicated in the construction and ascription of identity and in forging solidarity projects.

Expressions of collective identity and solidarity can be viewed at the level of interpersonal relationships, the nation-state, or in terms of transnational social forces. It is possible to stand in solidarity with a group or people otherwise divided by geographical location, nationality, class, and/or ethnicity, on the basis of empathy with their cause, or ground solidarity in perceived shared characteristics, or shared social principles. One's sense of identity and identification with others emerges in a social world of shared meanings and practices forged around self/other relationships. Since identity is neither fixed nor essential, it becomes necessary for social actors to establish 'a locus of attachment and secure shared meanings in order to stabilise identity', because 'in this way, political action in the name of constituted identity groups and their "interests" becomes possible'.⁸ Rather than postulating the existence of objective interests (on the basis of class, nation, gender or some other 'stable', homogenous category) it is more fruitful to regard both interests and identities as constructed, but nevertheless serving as a (potentially) unifying political force.

For feminist activists the privileged locus of identity, attachment and 'interest' is gender. Differences between women notwithstanding, gender remains a significant

⁶ P. Chatterjee, 'Whose Imagined Communities?', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 20:3 (1991); D. Kandiyoti, 'Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation', *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, 29:3 (1991), pp. 243–429.

⁷ G. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

⁸ G. Crow, *Social Solidarities: Theories, Identities and Social Change* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), p. 25.

marker of social inequality and poverty in the world today.⁹ Gender also determines to a large degree one's access to and control of resources.¹⁰ Moreover, women across the world continue to experience discrimination simply because they are women. In so far as women in varied locations continued to regard gender as a 'site of contestation' and a 'mediating factor in their lives and their communities',¹¹ then the strategic necessity of organising as women is affirmed and a strong foundation for feminist solidarity is established. Women's struggles thus affirm the feminist emancipatory interest in challenging gender discrimination and reinforcing 'the equality, rather than the inequality, of women'.¹²

Questioning the primacy of collective identities and attachments to the nation-state is the first stage in exploring 'the ways that transnational actors can design the means to facilitate the creation of a variety of international collective identities'.¹³ As Rupp has argued, 'women's internationalism points the way to one form of global identity, to add to the more parochial views we have of ourselves'.¹⁴ When Virginia Woolf proclaimed in 1938 that 'as a woman I have no country'¹⁵ she was espousing an internationalist sentiment that was characteristic of the feminist movement in the early twentieth century. This sentiment of 'universal sisterhood' is alive and well in the twenty-first century. For example, the Global Sisterhood Network embraces: 'feminists from around the world who work hand-in-hand, irrespective of class, colour or creed, in a collaborative effort to create improved lives for women'.¹⁶

The Women in Black Women's Solidarity Network Against War links the cause of ending war and with the ending of 'all forms of violence and discrimination against women'¹⁷ and, in so doing, boldly asserts a common and collective identity shared by women, rejecting 'the imposed national identity based on the glorification of its own nation and the creation of hate towards other nations'.¹⁸ The rejection of nationalist identities (thus constructed) is seen as a precondition for the development of 'the identity of woman, the other, oppressed and harassed by all war masters/mongers, without any difference to which nation we belong'.¹⁹ Similarly, in constructing gender solidarity, the point of departure for activists within the transnational network Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML) is to challenge the 'erroneous belief that the only possible existence for a Muslim woman that allows her to maintain her identity (however defined) is the dominant one delineated of her in her national context'.²⁰

And yet the claims of nation and culture cannot be easily dismissed, not least because debates about culture have been at the core of the constitutive tension

⁹ R. Hausman, L. D. Tyson and S. Zahidi, *The Global Gender Gap* (World Economic Forum Report: Geneva, Switzerland, 2006).

¹⁰ (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch>) (accessed April 2007).

¹¹ Lea Wood 'Gendered Imagination: Women's Resistance to Islamist Discourse' at: (<http://www.ilstu.edu/mtavokol/lwood/htm>), p. 9 (accessed April 2007).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹³ Crow, *Social Solidarities*, p. 27.

¹⁴ L. J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ V. Woolfe, *Three Guineas* (London: Harvest, 1963).

¹⁶ (<http://www.global-sisterhood-network.org/content/view/603/68/>) (accessed April 2007).

¹⁷ See Women in Black, 'Women's Solidarity Network Against War', (<http://lists.partners-intl/pipermail/women-east-west>), p. 2 (accessed April 2007).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See (www.wluml.org), Mission Statement, p. 1 (accessed April 2007).

between solidarity and difference in feminist practice alluded to above. The ‘politics of difference’ that has been manifest in transnational feminist activism will be elaborated below. Furthermore, in so far as the state remains the primary locus of political authority; women in diverse locations continue to be subject to national systems of legislation and rely ultimately upon the state to uphold internationally agreed human rights conventions that seek to embed minimum standards for women. This is particularly problematic for women in cases where the claims of culture are evoked by political elites in the interests of legitimising the existing political, social and gender order.

At this juncture, it is sufficient to note that differences of culture, nation and religion must be confronted and negotiated in the interest of forging feminist solidarity. Moreover, since diversity has always been a feature of the feminist movement, to understand the feminist movement it is necessary to devise an analytical framework that facilitates an understanding of how boundaries and identities are constructed ‘sometimes through conflict’ and sometimes on the basis of a shared ‘sense of togetherness.’²¹

The feminist movement as a social movement

Social movements are often cited as examples of internationalised collective identities that serve as a locus for solidarity in world politics, uniting members around the cause of opposing the current social order and promoting an alternative set of values, beliefs and practices.²² As Crow argues, to identify with a movement and its practices, ‘is to commit oneself to it in a way that normally involves endorsing its practices and seeking to promote its interests, whilst regarding one’s well-being as intimately linked to its flourishing’.²³ Boundary drawing processes are a feature of social movements. The construction of boundaries and identities enclose certain ideas and demands and exclude others.²⁴ Rupp and Taylor identify at least three processes involved in the formation of political identities: the creation of boundaries that mark off the group; the development of consciousness of the group’s distinct and shared disadvantages; and the politicisation of everyday life, embodied in symbols and actions that connect members of the group and link their everyday experiences to larger social injustices.²⁵ Rupp and Taylor suggest that feminists are ‘social movement actors’ in so far as individual feminist activists are situated within an organisational and movement context. Feminism is more than gender ideology, it is a collective identity and so the nature of the feminist movement has to be understood in terms of the complex, ever-changing processes through which boundaries are drawn that separates ‘us’ and ‘them.’ However, most of the literature on social movements has tended to focus largely on the ‘unitary aspects of collective identity and ignore significant differences

²¹ M. M. Ferree, and S. Roth ‘Gender, Class and Interaction between Social Movements: A Strike of West Berlin Day Care Workers’, *Gender and Society*, 13:6 (December, 1998), p. 628.

²² N. Crossly, *Making Sense of Social Movements* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002).

²³ Crow, *Social Solidarities*, p. 23.

²⁴ L. J. Rupp and V. Taylor, ‘Forging Feminist Identity in an International Movement: A Collective Identity Approach to Twentieth Century Feminism’, *Signs*, 24:2 (Winter 1999), p. 365.

²⁵ Rupp and Taylor, ‘Forging Feminist Identity’, p. 365.

of identity and interest.²⁶ Re-evaluating and re-assessing the nature of collective identity groups (notably social movements) has been a prominent feature of recent feminist scholarship.

The politics of difference in feminist activism

The unfolding history of international feminist activism reveals that feminist solidarity has involved struggles to mobilise women as women, which has in turn involved the construction of a collective identity and the construction of common 'interests'. In this struggle, one can identify 'moments of collective creation' in which activists have successfully cohered around 'ideas, identities and ideals' that have 'served to provide a sense of shared purpose, or even a common bond among members'.²⁷ However, there have also been moments when tensions and division among feminist activists have been palpable.

In so far as difference and diversity has always been a feature of feminist movements, feminist activists have long been cognisant of what potentially divides women. This was evident in the nineteenth century feminist movement in Europe and North America. The fledgling feminist movement was never entirely void of tensions and potential or actual fissures and splits.²⁸ This is not to say that diversity-national, linguistic, cultural, ethnic and religious-was necessarily divisive. Without glossing over the tensions within the movement, Leila Rupp remains impressed by the strength of the bonds that women did forge across national boundaries and multiple languages.²⁹ In foregrounding women's differences from men and creating single sex organisations, activists were able to forge a deeply felt solidarity based on gender.³⁰

Since the 1980s, however, a divisive 'politics of differences' within feminist practice has been particularly evident and this has been manifest in international forums and political spaces. In this usage, 'politics' means social relations involving the exercise of power. The exercise of power can be overt or insidious; involving for example, the control of concrete resources, or the assertion of authoritative statements and of 'universal' claims, that deny diversity. The 'politics of difference', in feminism, alludes to the various ways in which feminist projects have been constructed in the name of 'women' that have failed to recognise and respect the 'Other' and have reproduced unequal power relations. This politics has generated tensions between feminist activists in varied locations around the world and has sometimes led to public conflict and fragmentation.

Attempts to utilise the forums and spaces provided by the United Nations (UN) to build bridges across boundaries, advance political projects and forge solidarities have been dogged by tensions and conflicts. The UN women's conferences (1975,

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

²⁷ R. Eyerman and A. Jamison, *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 4.

²⁸ B. Caine, 'Feminism, Suffrage and the Nineteenth Century Women's Movement', *Womens' Studies International Forum*, 5:6 (1982), pp. 306–330; M. LeGates, 'Feminists before Feminism: Origins and Varieties of Women's Protests in Europe and North America before the Twentieth Century', in J. Freeman (ed.), *Women: A Feminist Perspective* (London: Mayfield, 1984).

²⁹ Rupp, *Worlds of Women*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

1980, 1985 and 1995) generated networks that facilitated the forging of linkages across national borders. Yet, as the dominance of Western feminist organisations at the UN and in other international networks and forums was challenged, the notion that 'sisterhood is global'³¹ was contested by feminist activists from developing countries. At such times, appeals for solidarity among women on the basis of 'shared interests' or 'common experiences' were viewed with scepticism. Indeed, the Western-dominated Women In Development (WID) movement, insofar as it promoted Western (liberal) conceptions of 'women's liberation', was charged with reproducing, rather than challenging, existing power relations and contributing to the oppression and exploitation of 'Third World Women'.³²

The profound impact that this politics had on feminist theory during the same period has been extensively documented and so need not be elaborated here, suffice to say that there was a notable shift in academic feminist discourse away from universal conceptions of 'women' and the assertion of common interests, towards the prioritisation of difference and the celebration of plurality.³³ Transnational and postcolonial feminisms drew attention to economic exploitation attendant in globalisation that had a gender dimension, but also stressed the importance of understanding and negotiating the intersections of race, gender and sexuality in challenging gender inequality.³⁴ While contributors to the debate adopted varied positions on the implication of difference for feminist theory and practice, there was general agreement that solidarity could not be assumed on the basis of a false homogeneity among women.

The 1995 Beijing conference has been characterised as a triumph for the feminist project of solidarity at the international level insofar as women's groups and feminist activists from around the world were able to agree on large sections of the Platform of Action and seemingly unite around the cause of promoting women's human rights.³⁵ While there is some substance to this claim, it is nevertheless a claim that requires qualification. The NGO forum also served as a site in which differences, and indeed conflicts were openly aired. For example, Mallika Dutt records how all US women of colour were regarded as 'American' by women from the South and how 'Americans' were, in turn, perceived to be 'arrogant, insensitive and imperialist'.³⁶ Whereas women of colour generally saw themselves as oppositional forces in US, they were now compelled to confront the role of the US as an aggressor and a violator of women's human rights. The United States was held to be driving the project of economic globalisation that had resulted in cut-backs in welfare, corporate downsizing and job losses for women and increasing levels of poverty among women in developing countries.³⁷

³¹ R. Morgan, *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (Anchor Books, 1984).

³² C. Mohanty, A. Rosso and L. Torress, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

³³ I. Grewal and C. Kaplan (eds.), *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1994).

³⁴ Grewal and Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies*.

³⁵ C. Bunch, 'Beijing '95: Moving Women's Human Rights from Margin to Centre', *Signs*, 22:1 (Autumn 1996), pp. 200–4; E. Ngan-ling Chow, 'Making Waves, Moving Mountains: Reflections on Beijing '95 and Beyond', *Signs*, 22:1, p. 187.

³⁶ M. Dutt, 'Some Reflections on US Women of Color and the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women and NGO Forum in Beijing, China', *Feminist Studies*, 22:3 (1996), p. 523.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 521–522.

Constructive conflict

Given the often very bitter recriminations between Western and Southern based groups at the UN, one could be forgiven for displaying scepticism, if not incredulity to the claim that conflict does not necessarily preclude or negate the possibility of forging feminist solidarity. However, if solidarity is understood as a project that is forged through political struggle; then this struggle might carry ‘with it the willingness to accept responsibility for using conflict constructively’.³⁸ As bell hooks has argued, in the midst of conflict and contestation, feminist activists ‘must find ways to renew their commitment to political struggle and strengthen their solidarity’.³⁹ The struggle to forge solidarity also entails a responsibility to respond to the different problems and priorities of women and be sensitive to the contexts in which women organisations and feminist groups operate.

There have been moments when conflicts have emerged that have, or have threaten to, fragment and divide the movement in ways that seemingly confound the possibility of solidarity. However, conflicts have also served to inspire deep reflection and prompt renewed efforts to work through differences in the interest of establishing common cause. Hooks has argued that conflict is likely to be viewed as a ‘cause of despair’ since it seemingly points to the impossibility of women working ‘together in social space that is not irrevocably tainted by the politics of domination’.⁴⁰ However, hooks goes on to suggest that confronting conflict is a necessary process in a ‘sustained committed struggle’ towards a feminist agenda that advances emancipation.⁴¹ Thus, one might recast conflict as a creative force in feminist activism, rather than evidence of an increasing propensity towards fragmentation and separatism.

Dutt argues that the Beijing conference had a deep impact on women’s groups in the US. In their accounts of their experiences at Beijing, US women of colour described a profound shift in consciousness and a determination to struggle to implement this transformation in consciousness and perspective (on the global role of the US particularly) in their day to day organising and practices.⁴² While US women of colour reported experiencing ‘suspicion and hostility’ from Southern women, many also remarked that recognising that women from developing countries were ‘powerful voices for change’ rather than ‘victims’ was the ‘starting point in changing the dialogue between women in the US and women in many parts of the world’.⁴³ Solidarity might even be usefully understood as ‘a relation constructed through forms of dialogue and struggle’.⁴⁴ It is interesting to note that the experience of being compelled to confront their own complicity in oppressive practices was a salutary one for American women of colour. Nevertheless, all of the women Dutt interviewed described the ‘sense of global solidarity, pride and affirmation’ that they experienced in Beijing and many commented on the ‘vibrancy and power of the global women’s

³⁸ Hooks, ‘Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women’, p. 125.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁴² Dutt, ‘Some Reflections on US Women of Color’, p. 520.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 520.

⁴⁴ F. Pfler, ‘No Basta Teorizar: In-Difference to Solidarity in Contemporary Fiction, Theory and Practice’, in Grewal and Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies*, p. 225.

movement', a vibrancy and power that contrasted starkly with the 'lack of unity and strength in the US women's movement'.⁴⁵

Forging an inclusive solidarity

It is evident, then, that the struggle to forge solidarity involves an effort to secure a basis for unity in the midst of differences. Feminist solidarity cannot be forged on the basis of 'shared victimhood' since such strategies encourage women to avoid 'confronting the complexity of their own experiences' and prevent activists from reflecting upon their own social status and position and from understanding and appreciating their differences.⁴⁶ Hooks argues that to build and sustain solidarity, it is necessary to 'respect our differences' and to 'affirm one another' by understanding and appreciating the contribution that all women make to feminist struggles.⁴⁷ Women in their diversity might then struggle in a supportive way to build the foundation for solidarity.

Contemporary feminist discourse challenges or destabilises fixed identities in favour of complex and specific socially situated selves. However, while identity categories might well be political fictions, they are strategically necessary to make claims in the name of constituted identity groups. If identity is understood to be fluid, rather than fixed and constructed through the dynamic interaction of groups, rather than a static precondition for political mobilisation, then strategies to build alliances and support networks for groups struggling against gender injustices in specific contexts might be effectively worked out that enhance the possibilities for achieving an inclusive solidarity. This might mean that solidarity is strategic and, moreover, might not endure over a long period of time, nevertheless it is preferable to an exclusionary and ultimately divisive 'solidarity' that is built upon hegemonic discourses and practices that silence particular voices in the interests of maintaining ideological orthodoxy and Western hegemony.

Dialogue has become a central concept in contemporary feminist thought. The process of dialogue encourages participants to listen, to hear and to appreciate difference.⁴⁸ In this way, a new kind of feminist politics can be forged that refuses hegemonic ideologies that privilege Western subjects and experiences and seeks to build an inclusive solidarity on a foundation of heterogeneous knowledge and an ethic of respect for the 'other'.⁴⁹

Inclusive solidarity requires dialogue and communication to be built into feminist practice too. However, just as there have been debates within feminist theory since the 1980s about whether and how respect for difference can be squared with the strategic imperative of speaking as women, feminist activists have similarly reflected on such questions. As a larger number of activists from developing countries have achieved greater representation in international political forums and spaces, Western

⁴⁵ Dutt, 'Some Reflections on US Women of Color', p. 519.

⁴⁶ Hooks, 'Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women', p. 128.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴⁸ K. Hutchings, 'Speaking and Hearing: Habermasian Discourse Ethics, Feminism and IR', *Review of International Studies*, 31:1 (2005), p. 158.

⁴⁹ M. Waller and S. Marcos, *Dialogue and Difference: Feminisms Challenge Globalization* (London: Palgrave, 2005).

feminists have been compelled to confront head on their own location within a world that is grossly unequal, in which some women have wealth, resources and power and others face considerable material deprivation and experience multiple forms of oppression. Activists in the US based human rights organisation MADRE came together ‘across differences of culture, class and community, recognizing one another by their shared commitment to linking the struggles against sexism, racism, war, homophobia and economic exploitation in which they were active.’⁵⁰

Moreover, Western feminist activists have been required to reflect upon their complicity in the reproduction of unequal power relations and in the ‘Othering’ of non-Western women. The growing representation of women’s organisations from the global South over the past three decades has been a most welcome development, not only because it has generated serious reflection on the politics of difference in feminist activism, but also because it has provided a model of alternative practice that points the way to how a project of solidarity might be rethought and reconstituted.

Recognition and respect for difference is an integral part of the discourse of many contemporary feminist activists. For example, the feminist peace organisation Women for Women encourages ‘communication among women of varied backgrounds, national origins, races and religions’, recognising that ‘both those who need assistance and those who offer it – must honour each others’ differences’.⁵¹ Respect for difference is a core feature of many other solidarity networks. Women in Black include women of many ethnic and national backgrounds, working for a world where difference does not mean inequality, oppression or exclusion and provide a network in which ‘women in regions differently situated in relation to armed conflicts . . . can lend support to each other.’⁵²

The work of WLUML similarly bears testimony to the need to recognise how women’s struggles are greatly complicated by the claims of culture, religion and national identity. Farida Shaheed argues that WLUML recognises that the ‘fear of being cut off from one’s collective identity militates against women challenging “Muslim laws”’.⁵³ However, the support provided by another collectivity that functions as an alternative reference group, helps women to redefine the parameters of their current reference group. She suggests that ‘the links with women from other parts of the Muslim world-whose very existence speaks to the multiplicity of women’s realities within the Muslim context-provide an important source of inspiration’ for women in Muslim countries. Thus, ‘WLUML makes an important contribution to women’s struggles for justice in specific locations by opening doors to a multiplicity of possible alternatives.’⁵⁴ Women in Black similarly acknowledges diversity in experience, encouraging women to ‘talk openly about their experiences in war’ and ‘listen with respect’ to the stories of women from diverse national and religious backgrounds and different political and sexual orientations, thus acknowledging both complex identities and the varying contexts in which women experience violence.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ <http://madre.org/articles/int/fall03nl.html> (accessed April 2007).

⁵¹ <http://www.womenforwomen.org/corevalues.htm> (accessed April 2007).

⁵² <http://www.womeninblack.org/about.html> (accessed April 2007).

⁵³ F. Shaheed, ‘Controlled or Autonomous: Identity and the Experience of the Network Women Living Under Muslim Laws’, *Signs*, 19:4 (1994), p. 1005.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1007.

⁵⁵ See Women in Black ‘Women’s Solidarity Network Against War’, <http://lists.partners-intl/pipermail/women-east-west>, p. 2 (accessed April 2007).

Reflexivity on one's own privileged position and voice is a central part of the struggle to build solidarity, as are efforts to dismantle 'structures of privilege' that prevent the articulation of women's interests, needs and rights, by women's groups in varied societies, from being heard. Networks of solidarity forged among a wide array of women's groups function as a means of support and resources for local groups and networks so that the views of women in diverse locations can be disseminated. The project of solidarity imposes an obligation on women activists (particularly in the West) who claim to stand in solidarity with women struggling for their rights in diverse societies across the world to not only 'understand the oppressive relations in which women are enmeshed well enough to serve them in the struggle against those relations', but to also 'make available to them discursive and material resources to assist in that struggle.'⁵⁶ In this way activists are able to understand and appreciate differences and consequently are able to offer appropriate support to women's groups in specific locations.

The women's human rights agenda as a locus of solidarity

The women's human rights agenda is appealing precisely because it is a site where a feminist project of solidarity can be forged without the need to embrace a 'thick' universalism. I will elaborate on what I mean by this below, but first it is appropriate to revisit briefly the challenges to the women's human rights agenda posed by competing claims of 'nation' and 'culture'.

Nation, culture and women's rights

Historically, human rights have been a central plank in efforts to construct feminist solidarity. Women's Rights Watch believe that the role of human rights is to 'mark out spaces of personal freedom, to affirm areas where individual privacy and dignity and autonomy should prevail against state or community regulation.'⁵⁷ However, across the world activists who have campaigned for women's rights have been stigmatised and accused of 'betraying the nation'.

The appropriation of 'culture' by nationalist elites presents feminists with a tricky problem when working out strategies to promote women's rights. As Women's Human Rights Watch argue:

Human rights are neither representative of, nor oriented towards, one culture to the exclusion of others. Universal human rights reflect the dynamic, coordinated efforts of the international community to achieve and advance a common standard and international system of law to protect human dignity.⁵⁸

At the same time, however, the organisation recognises that 'the doctrine of cultural relativism represents a formidable and corrosive challenge to women's rights to

⁵⁶ Pfeli, 'No Basta Teorizar', p. 225–6.

⁵⁷ <http://hrw.org/wr2k5/anatomy/4.htm> (accessed April 2007).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

equality and dignity in all facets of their lives.’⁵⁹ Thus, Women’s Human Rights Watch contends that:

When a culture is reinvented for ideological purposes as a faceless, seamless whole-incapable of dissent from within, so that any dissenter automatically becomes an outsider; incapable of changing, so that growth seems like destruction-it has ceased to be an environment in which people can live and interpret their lives. It has become a rhetorical weapon to be wielded against individuals, a tool of repression.⁶⁰

Women’s human rights as a political tool

Increasingly human rights have become central to the discourses and practice of many NGOs and have been embraced by diverse social movements, including feminist organisations who regard human rights as a (potentially) ‘empowering tool’ for feminist groups and for individual women.⁶¹ It would be uncontroversial to state that human rights discourse now enjoys legitimacy in many countries around the world (even while human rights violations continue to be widespread). Post-Beijing, the women’s human rights agenda has served to mobilise women not just in the West, but women across the world. Moreover, processes of social change in domestic/national societies have been impelled through the incorporation of human rights norms into domestic systems of law.⁶² This has allowed individual women and women’s groups in many countries to appeal to international conventions and instruments in staking claims for women (even while the implementation of particular conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women has been slow in some countries).⁶³

When gender discrimination is framed as a human rights issue, practices that are experienced as oppressive and/or harmful to women within specific societies can be challenged at both national and international levels. Embracing human rights discourse does not mean that the inadequacies of human rights instruments are not recognised by activists, but it does furnish individuals and groups with a language and provides a political tool that can be wielded to hold governments to account when they fail to apply and implement international human rights standards that they have signed up to. In this way, women activists have been able to make use of existing tools of international law, while simultaneously highlighting their inadequacies in some respects.⁶⁴ Brooke Ackerly argues that women’s human rights activism has drafted the significant pieces of a model of cross-cultural human rights theory that can be used to reinforce norms of international customary human rights law, and to assess critically the claims of culturally legitimate deviance from these norms, while

⁵⁹ <http://hrw.org/wr2k5/anatomy/4.htm> (accessed April 2007).

⁶⁰ <http://hrw.org/women/> (accessed April 2007).

⁶¹ A. Afsharipour, ‘Empowering Ourselves: The Role of Women’s NGOs in the Enforcement of the Women’s Conventions’, *Columbia Law Review*, 99:1 (1999), pp. 129–72; C. Bunch, ‘Transforming Human Rights from a Feminist Perspective’, in J. Peters and A. Wolper (eds.), *Women’s Rights, Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁶² T. Risse, S. C. Ropp and K. Sikkink (eds.), *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁶³ Division on the Advancement of Women (DAW), ‘State Parties to the CEDAW’ (2001), at: <http://www.un.org/daw/CEDAW> (accessed April 2007).

⁶⁴ Bunch, ‘Transforming Women’s Human Rights’.

respecting value plurality across and within cultures. In this way, the universality of human rights is substantially meaningful even while the realisation of human rights is not uniform.⁶⁵

Insofar as solidarity must be 'built upon women's multiple identities, experiences and locations'⁶⁶ due regard has to be paid to the specific context in which activists engage in concrete struggles to realise human rights. Context necessarily profoundly shapes the strategies that activists employ and determines the degree to which human rights discourse can open up (or perhaps in some contexts close down) possibilities for achieving change. However, human rights instruments establish minimum standards and allow considerable 'room for cultural variation without diluting or compromising the minimum standards of human rights established by law.'⁶⁷ These minimum standards are in fact quite high, requiring from the State a very high level of performance in the field of human rights.

Rights talk

The flexibility of human rights is also helpful to activists seeking to promote and implement human rights in diverse national and cultural contexts. Feminist activism around women's human rights demonstrates that women's rights cannot be articulated in terms of transcendental principles, but have to be worked out and negotiated in specific contexts according to circumstance. In this respect, activists can be viewed as not only lobbyists and advocates, but also participants in a dialogue involving intersubjective negotiation on both the concept of rights and the substantive content of women's human rights, and how best to advance this project in diverse societies. A recurrent theme of the work that has appeared on the Beijing conference has emphasised the way in which the NGO forum particularly functioned as a space in which activists engaged in dialogue on human rights. This dialogue necessarily addressed the tensions between 'rights talk' and 'culture talk' and explored not only the meaning of 'culture', but the actual workings of rights in practice in concrete contexts.⁶⁸ This dialogue necessarily involved discussion about what human rights for women might mean in specific locales and how relevant treaties and conventions on women's human rights might be implemented most effectively to serve women in different national and cultural contexts.

Human rights as a foundation for transnational solidarity

The practice of WLUML in forging a transnational solidarity network attests to both the value and utility of rights discourse and the need for sensitivity to difference and for locally informed strategies of resistance. Shaheed argues that WLUML's

⁶⁵ B. Ackerly, 'Women's Rights Activists as Cross-Cultural Theorists', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 3:3 (2001), p. 311.

⁶⁶ Grewal and Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies*, p. 18.

⁶⁷ <http://www.un.org/rights/dpi1627e.htm> (accessed April 2007).

⁶⁸ <http://hrw.org/women/> (accessed April 2007).

solidarity work involves responding to appeals for support from women whose human rights have been violated. The response might take the form of mobilising international support, securing the services of lawyers, identifying support groups, providing shelter, mediating between parties and lobbying governments. The WLUML solidarity network involves ongoing campaigns to mobilise international support in campaigns to reform or repeal discriminatory legislation, to end oppressive practices and to promote legislation favourable to women.⁶⁹

WLUML advocates solidarity among women, while explicitly acknowledging ‘the complexity and diversity of women’s realities in Muslim countries and communities’.⁷⁰ As noted above WLUML does not usually initiate campaigns, but rather responds to requests from local groups and individuals. This is because in some instances external support may either undermine the local struggle or endanger the concerned women.⁷¹ This proclivity to respond, rather than initiate, bears out the central importance that is given to empowering women and giving voice to those struggling against oppression in specific societies. In turn, individual women and local groups that appeal to WLUML see the network as an accessible system that connects them with other women’s initiatives, provides specific and general information and assists in publicising issues relevant to them. The WLUML network serves as a potential safety net and provides individual women and groups with the reassurance that international support is available and can be achieved by activating the network.⁷² At the same time, WLUML demonstrates that coalition building across boundaries must be sensitive to the need for ‘the application of locally informed strategies of resistance’.⁷³ Thus, WLUML both affirm the rights and autonomy of women and recognise that differing strategies and measures need to be utilised to realise promote and protect women’s human rights in concrete contexts.

MADRE similarly recognises that; ‘while women’s traditional social roles and discrimination against women are global in scope, they are experienced differently, depending on race, nationality, class, sexuality and other aspects of identity’.⁷⁴ MADRE provides ‘resources, training, and support to enable our sister organizations to meet concrete needs in their communities’.⁷⁵ The strength of the movement is thus forged on ‘differences while focusing on the universality of women’s roles and women’s oppression’.⁷⁶ Activists within the network see this as the key to ‘building lasting political partnerships between women from different communities’.⁷⁷ Thus MADRE aspires to build and sustain ‘a political practice as complex as the reality of women’s lives’.⁷⁸

⁶⁹ Shaheed, ‘Controlled or Autonomous’, p. 1013.

⁷⁰ See www.wluml.org (accessed April 2007).

⁷¹ Shaheed, ‘Controlled or Autonomous’, p. 1012.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 1013.

⁷³ Ackerley, ‘Women’s Human Rights Activist’, p. 315.

⁷⁴ (<http://madre.org/about/mission.html>) (accessed April 2007).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

This article has explored the constitutive tension between difference and solidarity in feminist practice. The central argument has been that solidarity can, and indeed in the case of feminist groups and networks must be forged across boundaries while recognising and respecting differences. While this article does not claim to make a substantive contribution to the theorisation of solidarity, it does demonstrate how thinking about the concept of solidarity in the context of feminist practice entails the need to negotiate a number of (seemingly) central paradoxes. Moreover, it points to the need to 'think outside the box' of methodological individualism and conceptualise solidarity in a way that moves beyond rigid dichotomies of identity/difference, conflict/cooperation and solidarity/fragmentation.

At first sight the notion that solidarity can be forged in the context of diversity appears paradoxical, since solidarity is normally thought to be rooted in a sense of empathy if not commonality, while difference denotes Otherness—that which is beyond or outside of one's experience. Contemporary feminist practice seeks to construct and affirm a collective identity: solidarity networks are established by women to support women who share a common aim of challenging gender inequality, discrimination and the denial of basic human rights to women in diverse societies across the world. However, commonly the narrative that underpins the solidarity project acknowledges the complexity of identities and respects different subject positions, different experiences and different knowledge. In this way complexity and plurality are recast as a source of strength, rather than weakness.

Moreover, the historical unfolding of feminist activism – particularly in a transnational context – demonstrates that the meaning and the possibility of solidarity has to be worked out in the course of practice. Feminist solidarity is not a sentiment based on an abstract idea or ideal, nor is solidarity a commitment born of 'women's common interests' in an objective sense. Feminist practice evidences that solidarities 'emerge along the lines of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and so on, and because the forms these solidarities assume shift and change, movements are apt to sometimes pull apart as well as pull together'.⁷⁹ At different times and in different locations, through periods of accord and conflict, unity and fragmentation, the meaning and the possibility of solidarity has been worked out in the process of political struggle.

The process of working through the politics of difference can be a painful experience. Yet the times when the politics of difference has seemingly pulled apart the bonds of gender solidarity, have been followed by a period of reflection and debate that has allowed support networks and coalition to be rebuilt. Conflict should not then be juxtaposed against 'cooperation'. In so far as conflict facilitates reflection and dialogue, it is essential in the process of establishing the common ground which makes cooperation possible. A feminist practice that is built on the principle of dialogue and respect for difference might mean that solidarity will be manifest in short term coalition building and the forging of loose alliances that are both flexible and strategic, but this is a necessary and appropriate response to the needs of diverse women in varied locations who nevertheless confront all too similar problems.

⁷⁹ Crow, *Social Solidarities*, p. 23.