

Women in Paradoxical Places: 'Out of Place' in the South and the North

By Yvonne Underhill-Sem

Throughout the 1990s, extremely difficult negotiations took place in the global struggle for the recognition of the fundamental nature of women's rights. The combined and courageous efforts of feminist advocates at United Nations conferences, along with other groups, were eventually rewarded with the recognition of the indivisibility and universality of human rights, as adopted in Vienna, and that women's rights are human rights, as articulated in Cairo and Beijing (Sen and Batliwala 2000, Sen and Correa 1999). The struggle now is to defend these rights because however admirable these gains are, they exist within the paradoxical spaces created by economic globalisation and religious fundamentalism (Sen and Madunaga 2001). This is evident in the tragic 11 September 2001 attacks in two key spots of the United States that fanatical religious fundamentalism was able to attack.

The shadows of these two forces—globalisation and fundamentalism—extend far into the lives of many women who occupy both the centre and the margins—the centre in some ways and the margins in others. For example, the women may be considered occupying the centre because as smaller interdependent markets become amorphous global markets, especially for women in the South, many aspects of their lives have been significantly altered by the flow of goods, services and people across borders. Plastic bowls, metal plates and cutlery, cotton fabric, salt, soap, paracetamol and pencils are no longer exceptional commodities even in small village trade stores in "remote" Pacific Islands. Undoubtedly, the easier access to such goods and services contribute to making domestic life easier—when there is cash to buy them.

Although there maybe no TV, Internet, electricity or running water, not so scarce are carefully wrapped bi-

bles and prayer books. Add to this the folklore that helps explain how and why people are behaving, dying or living in ways that go against common understanding. One also has to reckon with the inequitable clan exchanges that have longer-term effects than commerce, the trespassing of 'traditional taboos' such as marrying within clans or having children more of-



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ten than every two years. All of these, and more, are the range of possible reasons that might explain away daily life.

Everyday Contradictions

Such “inconsistencies” that are the stuff of women’s daily lives can be likened to their occupying “paradoxical spaces.” We must continue to understand the ways by which economic globalisation and religious fundamentalism continue to thrive in order to reverse them, just as we must also understand how these two forces are co-opting the institutions and practices that have been available to women in negotiating their paradoxes. We must be prepared for this task if we are to discern the role that women’s agency plays in feminist-led transformative development.

Many women successfully negotiate their way through these paradoxical spaces as they struggle daily to provide for their families and themselves. A poor woman might decide to sell nutritious garden produce for an ailing child craving for the taste of rice. A Christian mother of seven may secretly seek ‘traditional’ contraceptives to prevent further pregnancies while still subordinating herself to her husband, as the church teaches. A young mother of three may regularly attend church services with her husband, a ‘reformed’ wife-beater, for a glance at her lover. Each of these scenarios shows how women, in dealing with the complex power relations they live with, are exercising an agency that keeps them going.

This negotiation happens in many ways in different places and over time. And it is this diversity that creates the political tensions in a global arena between women from the South and women from the North. The recognition of shared biology does not necessarily provide the coherence for women as a political lobby. We are as often divided by our biology as we

are by our politics and religions. A pure essentialist approach that considers that women everywhere share an essential essence, a common biology that forms the bedrock upon which all women’s issues rest, has been abandoned because it assumes that ‘bodies’ are the same everywhere. (Yet the bodies of some women to this day remain excluded.)

Moreover, women are differently embodied—not just in relation to men, but also in relation to other women. Many women do not have children—some by choice, some because they suffered such sexual violence that they are unable and/or unwilling to have children. Thus, although similarly embodied, women experience their sexual and racial body in vastly different ways.

Pitfalls of Oversimplification

There has long been recognition that there are major distinctions between women in the North and women in the South on the basis of the legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism, their post-colonial present, or their class, race and geographical location. What is becoming more difficult to reconcile are the differences even in our experiences of sexuality and reproduction. This makes the struggle for universality in women’s human rights more difficult but also more critical. If we are not vigilant about accepting such differences, then we risk opening up the women’s movement to more pervasive forms of patriarchy, especially those embedded in religious fundamentalism and economic globalisation.

A response to essentialist approaches to women’s politics is the position that everything is socially constructed and therefore, variable, though not unchangeable. Although often dismissed as a mere theory that undermines the solidarity politics of the women’s movement, a social constructivist approach allows us to

sharpen our analysis of power relations and the possibilities for transformative change. It enables us to ask two important questions: On what basis are we allies with whomever, and at which particular points in time? While the structures of patriarchal fundamentalism and capitalist greed are becoming easier to identify, in many places, the power these have consolidated spreads through an array of power relations to create the complex political context within which women's movements navigate. The racial, economic and ideological warps of this context are held together by a variety of wefts so that the fabric is inevitably uneven in texture and color.

Identity Choices

One's personal location has become an important warp in this fabric. This does not refer to a simple geographical location—such as a country in the Northern hemisphere—but a relational location such as being from 'the South' in relation to being in 'the North.' This identification may be based on birth, citizenship or residence, but it is not necessarily hinged on a particular country. The intensification of population movements in a regime of globalisation means personal identities are even more complex for a growing number of people, especially women. The issue then becomes a personal one of knowing which particular places impassion you. Where are the struggles that are your struggles, regardless of your geographical location?

In my case, I was born in the South, with Southern ancestry, but I am a tied migrant living in the North, married with three children, with a partner also from the South who took on a job with an international agency. I yearn to return to familiar Southern places, despite the good plumbing we have, the relatively safe streets, and the access to far more (processed) food. I remain 'out of place' in the North and 'out of place' in the South. The happenings

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on my street bear little resemblance to the happenings on my streets in the South. More than this, my concern about poor child-care facilities here pales in significance when I learn that another young mother in the village died of childbirth last month. I still feel impassioned by a place far away. Being in the North has paradoxically sharpened the distinctions I make about the 'North' and the 'South.' My politics has no bearing on physical geography, it is a politics of identity and relative location.

For women to enjoy gender justice, economic justice, and democracy, an enabling political and economic environment is imperative. In the North, there are the possibilities for many to achieve this—they are able to vote, move freely in the streets, and claim some state welfare support. In the South, totally different strategies are needed to even begin to build such an environment. Moreover, this must be done while still dealing with situations where one's livelihood is always threatened and preventable diseases ravage communities; where unwritten rules restrict the freedom of women to talk and meet; where one's own body is constantly vulnerable to illness, malnutrition and violence. Few Southern Governments are the open champions of a gender-just national or

global order although they are very much in favor of a particular form of an economically just global order.

The Better Option

But, however much we criticise our governments and cultures privately and publicly, the dilemma is that public critique creates a space for the global fundamentalist forces of religion and tradition to offer their interpretations. This is one of the ways that democratic space concedes to the structures of economic globalisation and religious fundamentalism.

Navigating between capitalist agenda and religious fundamentalism is the unenviable position of all civil society groups. But because of the diversity of women's lives, politisation among feminist civil society groups has to make room for both strategic and coalitional politics. While this diversity could turn out fragmentary, such fragmentation should be seen as a symptom, and not necessarily a problem, of feminist work. We need to be able to work with and despite the fragmentary politics of the women's movement. But it is also important that we have a clear understanding of how new political dimensions are embedded with differing histories.

We must be able to practice inclusive politics with those who share the same goal of change for the benefit of women. At the same time, however, greater respect for the diversity enshrined in the framework of the universality of women's human rights is in order. This respect comes from accepting our differences, not merely tolerating what one ultimately believes is wrong. It is possible to respect the sensitivities speaking out against practices that 'oppress' women in the name of tradition, culture, history or religion. Taking the cues from women who struggle with these paradoxes on a daily basis will not only strengthen our analysis but also help create the non-judgmental

spaces for women to hear other voices. We all need such challenges so that we see the many particularities that shape the general, but our differences should be revealed in ways that do not belittle and disempower. Such challenges to the ability we have developed in naming and describing our indictments may be uncomfortable and painful, but this is much more worthwhile to withstand than the effects of strengthening religious fundamentalism or rampaging economic globalisation. ♪

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- (This opinion piece benefits greatly from many and ongoing discussions I have had with my DAWN colleagues and especially by a paper written by Gita Sen and Bene Madunagu, and a paper by Peggy Antrobus after 11 September 2001. However, I take full responsibility for what is penned here.)