

The Future of Feminist Proposals in the Context of Globalisation

By Sylvia Borren

When I first started working in NOVIB, the Dutch Oxfam, not long before the 1995 Beijing UN Women's Forum, I used to worry about my role, With which hat should I be speaking, my lesbian/feminist one, or as the director of a Dutch development agency? The nice thing today is that I do not have such worries anymore. I can speak, and am speaking to you with all my different hats on: feminist and lesbian activist, organisational consultant and development director.

Because we as Oxfam are working towards Global Equity, with a rights-based approach, we believe everyone should have: the right to a sustainable livelihood; the right to basic social services (health and education); the right to life and security (both in emergency and conflict situations and at home); the right to social, cultural and political participation (to have a say); the right to identity, ensuring that all these rights apply to women and whichever so-called 'minority' (including therefore my own lifestyle). And happily, this coherence is not only in me, but very much in the NOVIB and OXFAM development policy and practice that we stand for.

It is from my combined hats, and from a passionate 'fair globalist' (instead of 'anti-globalist') position that I will try to give you some reflections on the future of feminist proposals in the context of globalisation. I will do so in three steps. First I will present a very quick rough sketch of feminist achievements in the last thirty years. Then I will present an analysis of why we possibly feel we have lost our focus or even the movement. Finally, I will describe some of my hopes about future feminist positioning.

1. Feminist Achievements in the Last Thirty Years

It is hard to realise today that before and during the preparations for the first UN Women's Conference in Mexico, in 1975, women constantly met with strong resistance (politically, socially, from the media) for wanting to suggest that it was mistaken to say that the position of women was one and homogeneous. Much the same as we are now being wrongly dubbed as an 'anti-globalisation movement', feminists at the time were called 'man-haters' and lesbians. By the way most of them back then saw this as a serious accusation to be denied fervently whilst proclaiming everlasting loyalty to husband and children: Lesbianism was first openly discussed in the Social Forum in Copenhagen, in 1980, and at official UN level only at the third UN Women's Conference in Nairobi, in 1985. But in 1975 the news did get out: women exist, are not happy about the deal they are getting, and demand their space. The women's issue was put on the international agenda, even though not much homework had as yet been done.

By Nairobi 1985 this was remedied, and the facts were more truly staggering than imagined. It is to that conference that we owe the facts about women doing 80 percent or 90 percent of the world's work, and owning 1 percent of the world's property. And that 70 percent of the poorest in the world are women: lacking the most basic health and education, let alone decision-making power. The tensions in Nairobi were felt along the North/South divide. Our own non-stop lesbian workshop was seen as western and decadent by many (but not all) southern participants, although we argued that the right to decide about one's own body was the most basic human right, closely connected to issues of reproductive rights and violence.

Ten years later, at the UN Women's Conference and NGO Forum in Beijing, a solid programme of

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demands and action was agreed to following up on the World Social Summit in Copenhagen in that same year. The social agreements and pledges made at those two UN conferences, underwritten by nearly all countries in the world, stand today as a clear testimony that, by now, we know very well what problems women face. We also know how to solve these problems. And we have worldwide political agreements, even on issues of sexual orientation.

Outside the UN and NGOs movement, women's lives have changed significantly in the sense that there is growing women's leadership in the mainstream movement—social and government institutions—and that the percentage of women moving up in the corporate sector is growing. Women living in poverty are organising, and demanding and getting their rights: in small credit and saving schemes, microenterprise, more basic social services, more participation in local rural and urban decision-making. Women are organising against sexual violence, against AIDS, against trafficking. Women are using the Beijing agreements the world over to claim and demand their due. And the concept of 'gender-equity' has slipped into the most mainstream

thinking from political parties to corporate management writing and personnel policies.

Books about social movements of the twentieth century hail the women's movement as one of the most successful, with concrete results and progress visible. And without wanting to be partisan about it, it is my belief that much of this success was generated by strong, very hard-working feminists within the women's movement, and quite a few lesbians among them.

Why then, are feminist groups so often complaining about lost battles, lost momentum, lack of direction, lack of energy and insufficient participation and leadership from young women? My own view is that this is partly generational, partly burn-out and partly a conceptual/strategic problem. It is this last issue that I would like to address.

2. Why Do We Feel We Have Lost the Movement?

Perhaps a slightly different way to look at what the feminist movement has or has not achieved is to make use of some analytical tools, which come from the world of conflict resolution. This work helps to analyse conflicts (and the potential solutions) at three levels:

- conflicts of means: who gets how much of what?
- conflicts of values: what do you consider right and wrong?
- conflicts of identity: who are you, and does this meet with acceptance?

2.1. Much of the words and work done by feminists (but also by development agencies and governments) is connected to the language dealing with 'conflict of means', or limited means. This is basically the conceptual thinking indicating that some (few, rich, western, white, male, etc.) are getting more, and too much more than a much larger majority of others (many, poor, southern, female, etc.).

This is absolutely valid. Governments the world over committed themselves at the Social Summit in Copenhagen, in 1995, to have reached 13 goals in 2000 (about infant mortality, life expectancy, education, water and sanitation, health services etc.). These commitments are all about which part of the

population of which country gets how much of what. The Social Watch reports, which monitor the process of these commitments yearly, show convincingly that although progress is being made, more than half of the 160 countries have clearly not yet reached the very modest goals they set themselves in 1995. A significant number of countries have in fact slipped backwards. For instance, adult literacy went down only slightly, and although female literacy showed some improvement, it is still at a critically low level in many countries.

This is not, by the way, because the means are not available to meet these aims. Take the money western governments presently spend on agricultural subsidies, which too often leads to unfair dumping of agricultural products on southern markets to the detriment of local farmers. A mere 3 percent of those agricultural subsidies, some 10 billion American dollars a year, could mean schooling for the 125 million children who receive no education at all today. Similar arguments can be posed for women's access to loans, credit, property and land rights.

There are visible improvements in the last decades, national laws have improved, loan schemes and banks have discovered how reliable women are, and yet the gains are still far too slight, and the gender gap in ownership of property is still immense.

Perhaps the conflict of means that we as feminists have addressed most forcefully is the division of power. It has been fought over mostly at three levels: the issue of violence against women, the division of labor within the home, and the issue of women's leadership at civil, government and corporate level.

Feminists have realised that violence against women (and children) is connected to inequality of power and a huge amount of effective work has been undertaken to surface the extent of the problem, to help women to protect and heal themselves and to increase their level of assertiveness and personal power. Survivors of violence have become teachers and beacons for other women.

The sharing of child care and domestic chores has certainly been a major issue in the western world and role patterns have changed significantly although inequality continues. Similarly, women have worked hard to engender their organisations, to fight for equal wages and equal opportunities for women. With considerable success, we increasingly see women taking responsibility at management levels.

All the work I have been describing is tough, ongoing, and by no means finished. In this context, conflicts of means are solved in three ways: by creating more, by sharing more fairly, or by fighting it out.

Many of us are working in these ways. Our focus and goals are usually clear, and although we do not win all our battles, we are getting results. There are still new insights being learned: such as the importance of dealing not only with the victims, but also with the perpetrators of domestic violence. This is like the knowledge we gained within our gender work within NOVIB. We discovered that the partner-organisations, who showed no interest in or ability for improving their inadequate policy and practice in the area of gender, turned out to be the weakest partners in terms of organisational systems and accountability as well.

However, I do not think 'getting our fair share' should be our ultimate goal as women and feminists. We are certainly no longer the only ones working towards these goals, they have become mainstreamed in themselves. For we are also facing conflicts of values, and of identity. It is in these areas, I feel, that the feminist movement may have lost its way and possibly itself as a movement.

2.2 Conflicts of value are about more than 'who gets what'. They are about what we consider right or wrong, good or bad, about how we want to live, about what kind of world we want to live in.

It is at the level of values that the global debate is at its most heated today. Whereas at the UN Women's Forum (Nairobi 1985), strong tensions arose between northern and southern women, at the Beijing

Forum (ten years later) a tough fight was on between progressive and conservative forces. Women of conservative and fundamentalist Christian, Catholic and Islamic persuasion fought back hard against the proposals of their progressive sisters. It has always fascinated me that the border fights in this conflict are about the right of a woman to take control over her own body. All the most emotional issues of value-conflict are dealing with this underlying question: be it about contraceptives, abortion, sexual preference or female genital mutilation.

Beyond this, the value-conflict is about the gender role-patterns. Conservative men want their daughters and wives under their control, fundamentalists of whichever religion usually want them permanently in the home, preferably with little or no education. The underlying value conflict is about who OWNS the woman, and particularly her body, but often also her work. In polygamous communities this becomes very clear, because a man in the rural areas can afford another wife when his wealth increases, but taking another wife also increases his

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wealth because that second or third woman and her children will work a new piece of land for him. In this sense he can count his property and his status by naming his amount of land, his number of goats or cattle, and his number of wives. A similar but more hidden pattern in western countries sees rich or powerful men 'keeping' a mistress.

The values on which the universal declaration of human rights was built (and also the International Labour Organization (ILO) and other subsequent UN agreements) should obviously apply to women. This has been internationally agreed to, time and time again. Yet the reality of oppression of women seems to create less emotional waves than the issues around women claiming back the ownership over their own bodies in issues such as abortion and sexual preference. I remember how upset I felt when more than a year ago Kofi Annan spoke out against the Taliban for blowing up the ancient Buddhist statues more strongly than I had heard him argue about the oppression and destruction of a generation of women in Afghanistan during that decade.

In a way, we could argue as feminists that we have made good headway in convincing many more women and men worldwide that women are more than property, and have a value in ourselves. That we are not inferior to men, or predestined to be locked into particular role-patterns. Those women have the right to decide how to live their own lives and what to do with their own bodies. That men and children too benefit from the sharing of childcare.

On the other hand we all know that feeling of losing ground again. When young women choose to stay home to look after children. When increased work-pressure overloads women who try to run a job and a family. When we see the results of fundamentalist neo-liberal economic policies during the Asian crisis or now Argentina's, and we know how this will affect women living in poverty in those countries. When we see all those political promises for aid (the international 7 pledges), we know they are affordable and yet politicians, the world over, do not put their money where their mouth is. When we speak to women time and time again who have worked so hard to get their very reasonable aims (for

instance for health or education) implemented, and who are losing faith, withdrawing, feeling tired or burned out, at times retreating into cynicism. Whilst we know that we can only win the battle of values by having energy, staying alert, continuing to lead, to convince and to connect with old and new allies.

2.3 This brings me to the deepest conflict of all, the conflict of identity. Back in the late seventies I was involved in analysis of educational material, uncovering the 'hidden curriculum', the instilled identity images of girls and boys. Similar work has been done and still needs to be done to uncover the underlying ethnic stereotyping and racism.

Apart from all the well-known gender stereotyping, the main lesson back then was that boys and men are always 'DOING' something (football, adventures, etc.), whilst girls and women were always 'BEING' something (sweet, pretty, bitchy, etc.). It struck me then, and never has stopped bothering me that much of our feminist literature carries these same identity-assumptions, this same hidden curriculum in it. Men are usually described as the actors who are responsible for having created this unfair world, who abuse women, and who do or do not support us. Women are still too often described as the passive partner in the world relationships, worse still too often as the victim. In this sense we are still not taking on the identity of power and responsibility.

We know, particularly from the work done on domestic violence, that the perpetrator and the victim are caught in a repeating pattern of violence, that can only be broken if the victim breaks out, or is encouraged to take power, to organise support. When she relearns how to take control over her own life.

Somehow I feel this is what has happened to the feminist movement. We self-identify with, have become caught in (addicted to?) the role of the victim. We do not recognise enough the ground gained over the last decades, let alone that we congratulate those who have worked so hard to get us here. We do not identify and celebrate our leaders. We do not like, as a movement, the identity of power and success,

we are more used to focussing on the next issue of discrimination and suffering. And to be honest, there is plenty out there. But many young women and many successful women of whatever age do not want to self-identify as victims, do not feel symbiotically connected to suffering, and do want to break free.

Of course there are plenty of women who do break through glass ceilings, who hold powerful or leadership positions within government, civil society

My dream for our feminist future, then. More and more women having the courage to take on more power and responsibility, and to work from the premise that we can indeed successfully change the world, not only for women but also for everyone. More inclusive organising, more acceptance of diversity, more open debate about differences, less need for a symbiotic type of consensus. More alliance building amongst some women, but also men, in all different walks of life. More clever strategising towards particular goals, such as education for all, or reproductive rights, including contraception and abortion.

and the corporate sector. They are leaders, but does the movement see them as (still) belonging to the feminist movement?

The issue gets even more painful when outside voices claim that the feminist movement has become privileged, closed, not inclusive to diverse voices and opinions. The reflex is to deny. Like the woman daily living in domestic violence, who denies beating her children. This is not the only response, of course. There is excellent thinking and writing emerging about diversity and feminism, about plural feminist leadership. There are women who are not only writing but also living such leadership models.

But my challenge about our underlying identity, about the self-chosen identity of the feminist movement stands. Can we individually and collectively shake off the victim identity, take power and begin to see ourselves as DOING, as actors? Can we see it as our responsibility, not anyone else's, but our own responsibility to shape the world at whatever level we can? For it to become what WE want it to be: fair and equal, based on values of respect for life including the environment. Taking our feminist leadership position in whatever mainstream or movement position we find ourselves: from an identity of capacity and confidence, working towards a culture of respect for diversity and pluralism.

If we can, I do believe there will be a movement again, which can get energised and which can attract women (and also men) from all ages and backgrounds.

3. Hopes About Future Feminist Positioning

We have individually and collectively come a long way as women and as feminists. Many of us have had to overcome negative stereotyping, and social pressure not only as women, but also as women of color, from varying social backgrounds and lifestyles. In this we have had to fight ourselves free from a conflict of values which will resurface time and again, because long-standing xenophobia, racism, homophobia are not beaten that easily. Many of us have been involved in claiming our fair share: of income, health, education, decision-making power. For ourselves and for our sisters wherever, working hard to make the best of unnecessarily harsh and inhuman conditions.

Now it is time, in my mind, for many of us (many more than today), to take primary responsibility for shaping our world at micro, meso and macro level. In other words, to take feminism, the feminist movement and feminist leadership one step further. To be not only concerned about the shape of the lives of women, but to be concerned about the quality of the lives of men, women and children in a more general sense. To be concerned about finding solutions for the tensions and conflicts in the world, to take leadership in organisations, to look for ways to make our lives and our world more inclusive and more diverse.

For this we need to take on a different level of responsibility in our thinking. We need to recognise dilemmas, contradictions, difficult judgement calls. Let me take Afghanistan as an example once more. Through the years various women's voices spoke and wrote about the atrocities women underwent at the hands of the Taliban. As a movement we wanted this stopped. But we did not identify what we wanted done, by whom, exactly. Obviously asking the Taliban nicely was not going to do the trick. If we wanted this to stop, what were we asking for: sanctions? A military intervention?

When the present bombing of Afghanistan started I heard and read feminist voices against it. Fine, but if the USA had not gone in to find Bin Laden, but rather a UN force had gone in to fight the Taliban because of the human rights abuses of women, would we have been in favor? How would we have dealt with the predictable fact that some of us would have been for, and some against? Could we face a similar dilemma tomorrow, and come up with an advocacy position that we can carry as a movement? How do we organise that?

The feminist movement has always worked strongly on developing consensus. But when, in my hope and view, many more women take power and move into positions of responsibility, we will have accept more wholeheartedly the existence of diversity in our positioning—and we will have to debate that diversity more freely, more openly. In order to deal with diversity, I believe we will have to learn to be more autonomous in our relationships to each other,

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less symbiotic. I may always extend a basic solidarity to any woman, but beyond that I will want to know her views, her commitment to change, her energy, her ability to take on responsibility. This is actually more important to me than whether this woman self-identifies as a feminist or not. Many women doing excellent work do not.

What I really hope is that the debate on feminist leadership will become a reality. That more and more women will recognise the importance of being inclusive in how we organise, in recognising diversity and backgrounds and positioning. But I hope that this does not lead to endless attempts to discover consensus or inertia when predictably we cannot.

I hope that more and more women will take the lead from our battered sisters in other walks of life: that more and more women can and will take power and responsibility, and can begin to self-identify as strong and positive actors.

Some of us will, rightly, continue to work on women's issues. Others are involved in mainstream activities. Women are taking leadership in the corporate sector, in government, in social services, in civil society organisations. What a wonderful opportunity we have to network strategically. But then we have to learn to negotiate amongst ourselves. To build alliances there, where our interests coincide. To look for win-win opportunities. To accept that we can agree to work on particular plans and goals together, without agreeing totally on everything.

This is important to me, because NOVIB, as a funding organisation, gets approached very often for support. I find it very uncomfortable when this somehow gets tied into loyalty questions, instead of discussions about the goals and quality of the proposals. Because it reeks of clientelism.

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symbiotic type of consensus. More alliance building amongst some women, but also men, in all different walks of life. More clever strategising towards particular goals, such as education for all, or reproductive rights, including contraception and abortion.

The goals I will work towards, with many other women and men, are about a world of global equity, with the rights-based approach to development. I know there are many women who share those goals, those values. We must continue to gain ground in the conflict of means, we must get more to girls and women the world over: more education, more health, more income, more decision-making power.

I hope also to see more women standing up to take power and responsibility and leadership to work towards those goals: working from an underlying assumption of capacity, the ability to deliver, and the wish for success.

I then hope that we will get more clever and successful in strategising for change. And that women will begin to lead change in the world, and to find support: not because we self-identify as feminists necessarily but because we walk our own talk about inclusive leadership, supporting diversity. But particularly because we can design, plan, implement, and deliver, as feminist leaders in the mainstream or alternative circuits, with success. That is the kind of feminist network/movement I want to belong to.

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