

Towards **Citizenships** that are **Equal, Different** and **Plural**

by Tesa de Vela

This paper is part of a larger discussion paper on “Citizenship, Diaspora, and Marriage Migration in Asia,” a collaborative project of the Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA), with Isis International-Manila, and the Kanlungan Centre Foundation Inc. The summary discussions selected for this presentation are alternative notions of citizenship with particular focus on contributions coming from feminist theorists, queer theorists, and activists. Generally, the notions highlighted in this presentation interrogate citizenship as both gendered and sexual, and argue on behalf of development strategies that address both equality and difference (Lister, 2003). The paper also includes imaginings from the 3rd Feminist Dialogues (FD) presentations, illustrating that alternative notions of citizenship are intertwined with alternative notions of democracy (feministdialogues.isiswomen.org). These imaginings of citizenship will be linked to the realities of marriage migration in Asia, particularly the issues and conditions often encountered by Asian women.

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The politics of citizenship

Critics of the politics of citizenship put forward three distinct stances: “equality,” “difference,” and “pluralism”. Interpreting this in the particular context of women’s citizenship requires a kind of re-gendering process in which citizenship is viewed as the “gender-

neutral,” the “gender-differentiated,” and the “gender-pluralist” citizen (Lister, 2003).

Briefly, the gender-neutral citizen invokes beliefs of equality in terms of rights and obligations, and gender is put forward as immaterial to the access to citizenship and the person’s inclusion

as citizen. The gender-differentiated citizen, on the other hand, invokes a highly materialist construction of citizenship where gender is put forward as having uniquely defined gender roles and characteristics. Finally, the gender-pluralist citizen emerges from a concept of multiple and diverse subject-positions, and a rejection of a singular position such as gender, race, or class, as the defining subject position above others.

The politics of gender and sexual citizenship and the process of re-

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gendering citizenship proved most appropriate in our initial discussion of hitherto unexplored issues and perspectives in marriage migration. It challenges the traditional notions of citizenship, its perception and assumptions about what issues are most significant in marriage migration, and its fundamental premises which are nation-state centred and based on neo-liberal models of democracy e.g., participation in terms of rights and entitlements in the public sphere. Rather, the idea of citizenship as gendered and sexual puts forward the concept of “intimate citizenship.” Intimate citizenship (Plummer, 2003) is concerned with that which is linked to “our most intimate desires, pleasures, and ways of being in the world.” While certainly some of this can be linked back to traditional notions of citizenship, it also opens new areas for debate, and new spheres of concern

often overlooked when discussing citizenship. Some of these possible new areas of concern can be found in feminist praxis.

Radicalising Democracy, Radicalising Citizenship

At the recently held 3rd Feminist Dialogues which took place preparatory to the World Social Forum in January 2007 in Nairobi, feminists from various women’s movements gathered and sought radical notions of citizenship and democracy.

Significant among these notions were ideas shared by Virginia Vargas, an internationally recognised Peruvian activist, author, professor, and sociologist. Vargas, who speaks on feminism and social justice globally, advocates for the need to redefine the parameters of justice and see reality in its complexity. She quotes a slogan that goes: “Democracy in the country and in the house!” (Women in Action or WIA, No. 1, 2007, p. 10) which is understood as including all that is intimate in relationships. She cites the structured spaces (originally from *La Aventura* by Sosa Santos), from which a new political democratic culture can be constructed. This includes the domestic space and the struggle within it for self-determined sexual identity, the fight against domestic violence, the fight for new kinds of families, the fight for diverse sexual identities, and for the recognition of domestic work and reproductive work.

Such sites of struggle women in migrant marriages not only may encounter, but are expected to encounter given that the primary reasons for marriage migration are economic and gendered, and generally reinforce power relations in traditional patriarchal households. With

the existing flawed and exclusionary state-centred concept of citizenship, such women have little if any recourse for re-positioning their subordinate and restricted positions, nor from protecting themselves from inherently harsh conditions found in migrant marriages.

Another feminist from the 3rd FD, Jessica Horn, an activist and poet with roots in Uganda and the USA, shared her ideas of new feminist strategies in a neo-liberal world. A key principle in her feminist activism is what she refers to as the “first lesson,” which is, “in resisting you can never forget our identity in history—as a woman, as a person from the South, as a minority in the North” (WIA, No.1, 2007, p. 12). Horn, who is active in the African Feminist Forum, explains how “who you are determines how you experience violation” (WIA, No.1, 2007, p. 13) and as such should harness appropriate tools for resistance.

Horn reiterates the frequent call to be more concrete in our suggestions, moving from “opposing” to “proposing” change. She asks, “How do we use our collective power base to push the feminist agenda forward?” (WIA, No. 1, 2007, p. 15). We do so by gaining a better understanding of what we oppose, and a better understanding of perceived and actual power. For instance, we often perceive the state as having the power (and obligation) to protect its citizens, but will often be disappointed with its neglect and indifference.

This might also remind us of the actual power of women’s agency in the marriage migrant situation and the extent by which it can be practiced, despite the lack of formal citizenship recognition, the cultural subordination of women in society, and the patriarchal practices in the home.

The last feminist I would like to cite is Kamla Bhasin, a social scientist involved with many development issues ranging from education, gender, and media. Bhasin, who is based in India, describes governments today as divorced from their people, and therefore raises the call for people to take part in debates. Given that representative democracy is threatened by corporate globalisation, radicalising democracy and citizenship, says Bhasin, is about returning to the fundamentals of decision-making of and by the people. She believes this is not only possible but doable. She states: “Democracy is a value, a principle, a non-negotiable way of relating. Democracy must begin within ourselves, in our families and organisations” (WIA No. 1, 2007, p. 20). She places emphasis on the exercise of self-determination by women and other marginalised groups, and views it as often an exercise in gaining control of everyday lives,

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Again in the context of women in marriage migration, it is not just who they are that will determine women’s experience of violation, but who they are not. In cases where women are denied legal recognition of citizenship by their host countries, for numerous and diverse reasons, even the right to parent one’s own child can be violated.





Photo by: Precy Objaja-an

seeking to address practical problems and improve their living conditions.

According to individual interviews and group discussions conducted by this pre-research team, such everyday struggles of women were found to be not uncommon: from not being allowed to work outside the home, to doing forced and unpaid labour for the family farm, to little if any decision-making power in the home. Something we also found common in the literature and group discussions was the lack of recourse and sense of helplessness felt about resolving such struggles.

Conclusions or delusions

Feminists, activists, and other idealists are often criticised for their utopian ideas and unclear programmes for action. Given that the title of this panel begins with the word “Re-imagining,” it is implied that we see some value in dreaming. Perhaps for as long as the dreaming is grounded in social reality, seeking the voice of the marginalised, and challenging our own biases, such can be facilitated with the new, the fresh, out-of-the-box and radical thinking. For instance, these days marriage is not just between men and women but now include same-sex marriages. As such any

discussion on marriage migration should challenge our “heteronormative assumptions and also include an investigation into same-sex marriage migration. After all, issues such as domestic or intimate violence are not just occurring between women and men, but even in romantic same-sex relationships (Ofreneo, 2006).

A continued exploration of the domain that is marriage migration using citizenship, or any other concept for that matter, will only be as good as the frames and questions by which we conduct our investigation. ■



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Tesa C. de Vela is the Associate Director of Isis-International Manila. She has a Master of Arts degree in Women and Development from the University of the Philippines in Diliman, and she currently teaches Gender and Society at the International Studies Department at Miriam College, Philippines.

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