Summary and Keywords

Women’s activism has assumed an international dimension beginning in the nineteenth century. Transnational feminism has been shaped by debates over a wide range of issues: how to name and describe feminist inspired action that crosses national borders; how to create organizations, networks, and movements that acknowledge the multiple power differentials that exist among women while still allowing for concerted political action; and how to craft effective mobilization strategies in the face of highly differing forms of activism. These debates have fueled a surge in scholarly interest in the transnational activities of feminist groups, transforming the ways in which women’s studies, political science, international relations, sociology, and geography investigate the relationships between national and international levels of politics. The scholarship on transnational feminist actions has been influenced in large part by the concept of transnational advocacy networks/transnational feminist networks, which often bring together multiple kinds of actors such as social movements, international nongovernmental organizations, and more nationally or locally based actors. Another issue tackled by scholars who are politically committed to the goals of transnational feminist activism is how feminists are likely to achieve their goals and produce change through their transnational activities. These scholars can be expected to continue to develop their own research agendas on transnational feminist activism and to influence how transnational politics and globalization are studied in other fields.

Keywords: women’s activism, transnational feminism, transnational advocacy networks, social movements, international nongovernmental organizations, transnational feminist networks, transnational feminist activism, transnational politics, globalization

Introduction

The emerging body of scholarship on the transnational activities of feminist groups has transformed how women’s studies, political science, international relations, sociology, and geography study the relationships between national and international levels of politics. Analyzing how connections among social movements, activists, advocacy networks, nongovernmental organizations, and international institutions are formed and how these
relationships affect national and international politics has provided a foundation for a
growing body of interdisciplinary research. This growing scholarship on transnational
feminism has been shaped by debates over how to name and describe feminist inspired
action that crosses national borders; how to create organizations, networks, and move­
ments that acknowledge the multiple power differentials that exist among women while
still allowing for concerted political action; and how to craft effective mobilization strat­
egies given widely differing forms of activism and the huge variety of goals and issues tak­
en on by feminist activists. This essay examines how feminist activists have expanded the
scale and scope of their activities beyond an initial focus on the policies and laws of na­
tion-states to targeting a growing number of important regional and international organi­
zations (e.g., the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and the International
Monetary Fund (IMF)) and transnational networks (e.g., antiglobalization, environmental,
and human rights movements).

Since women began organizing in the nineteenth century, there has been an international
dimension to their activism. Only recently, however, have these global ties become the
subject of formal study. The global spread of women’s movements in the second half of
the twentieth century produced new opportunities for women to organize (Naples and
McGary forthcoming). The increasing recognition of transnational ties among women’s
movements and the effects of global processes on women’s inequality have generated a
new body of feminist research and scholarship (Naples and Desai 2002; Hawkesworth
2006). The networks, spaces, and organizations, including those within the UN, that were
created through sustained feminist organizing and activism around the Mexico City con­
ference and subsequent conferences in Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing
(1995) have often been a central focus of the expanding work on transnational feminist
activism (Stephenson 1982; Schuck 1985; Galey 1986; Cagatay, Grown and Santiago
Friedman 2003; Joachim 2007).

Research on the supranational level of contemporary women’s movements also sparked
interest in the historical development of these linkages as scholars began tracing the in­
ternational dimensions of earlier waves of feminist activities and women’s movements
Recently, historians have begun to examine how current debates over organizing stra­
egies, coalitional politics, and identity were handled in previous moments of mobilization
to derive possible lessons for ongoing activism (Sinha, Guy, and Woollacott 1999B; DuBois
and Oliviero 2009). Thus, the incredible growth of scholarship on transnational feminist
activism is the result of the simultaneous focus on analyzing current activities and on re­
covering the history of previous waves of organizing.
Creating a New Field: Names and Naming Practices

Within the scholarship, there are ongoing debates over naming the field, types of activism, and the identity of activists. These debates often reflect larger debates by feminist activists and scholars around issues of power, identity, and political strategies. As Hawkesworth (2006:69) notes, “When feminists claim to speak for women, they confront a host of vexing issues,” including issues of the definition of women, women’s interests, a women’s agenda, and feminism. Questions over who can claim to speak or represent others are central to the literature. The development of transnational feminism has been shaped by debates over how to best understand these questions in order to develop political tactics that can influence national and international organizations, sustain movements, and promote broader social and cultural change (Hawkesworth 2006:69).

The surge in activists, activities, and organizations viewed as “international,” “transnational” and “global” has helped to legitimize scholarly attention on women and women’s increasing political, economic, social, and cultural participation at supranational levels. Currently, the term “international” tends to be used to describe historical movements (Rupp 1994; 1997), while contemporary actions are more often described as “global” (Morgan 1984; Ferree and Tripp 2006) and increasingly “transnational” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Hawkesworth 2006). The choice of terms reflects differing political commitments, the time period under study, and changing targets of activism.

Rupp (1997), in her work on women’s activism from 1880–1920, defines women’s international activism as organizing not directed at either the immediate community level or at the nation-state. International activism generally refers to individuals coming together as representatives of specific countries in order to both “build consensus on projects and priorities” and to “forge understandings of differences and commonalities” (Rupp 1997:107). DuBois and Oliviero (2009:1) notes, expand the definition of international feminism to include “interactions between feminist activists from diverse homelands, the organizations they formed to facilitate these interactions, and even the imaginings they nurtured of innovative boundary crossing and alternative political identities.”

While “international” has a positive or neutral connotation for historical work, scholars working on contemporary supranational feminist activism often choose “transnational” as a way to signify their recognition of the influence of “imperial feminism” (Hawkesworth 2006:46) on feminist activism during the first “wave” of international women’s organizing. DuBois and Oliviero (2009:1) argue, however, that this move is dependent on a false dichotomy between “the multiple, diverse, worldwide voices speaking on behalf of women’s needs and rights in our own era, and the allegedly hegemonic, falsely monolithic, Eurocentric leadership of an earlier period.” Instead, they argue for the need to reconceptualize the history of international feminist activism as one of “multiple pasts” that explore the influence not only of Europe and North America, “but also from women of the global South and East, who exchanged, initiated, altered, domesticated and re-exported...
women’s rights influences of their own” (DuBois and Oliviero 2009:2). Historians such as DuBois and Oliviero seek to disaggregate the notion of a single “Western feminism” by paying attention to the differences among the imperial powers (such as Britain, the United States, and the Netherlands). New historical research also highlights the need to emphasize how women positioned as marginalized or subaltern, like African Americans in the United States, used access to the international arena to push forward agendas that were blocked at the national level during this time. While acknowledging that multiple forms of discrimination (including racism, imperialism, and classism) shaped the tactics pursued by the first international feminist activists, these forms of discrimination also sparked resistance, sometimes leading to the foundation of new women’s international organizations such as the International Council of Women of Darker Races, the Pan Pacific Women’s Association, and the Inter-American Commission of Women (Rupp 1997; Bolt 2004; Hawkesworth 2006; Materson 2009). Current work seeks to develop a more nuanced history that pays attention to both the victories and the “intended and unintended consequences of transformative efforts” that have shaped and continue to shape current activism (Hawkesworth 2006:61).

Global Sisterhood vs. Transnational Feminisms

The term “global” is also beginning to fall out of favor due to similar concerns that it promotes celebratory accounts of women’s ability to mobilize across national borders that fails to account for power differentials that exist among women. Many scholars currently prefer using “transnational” due to increased recognition of the limits of “global sisterhood” and the continued importance of cultural differences (Conway 2008). The term “transnational” also emphasizes that, even as women are coming together across national borders, national and regional differences persist. Desai (2005:319) defines transnational feminism as cross-border organizing and argues that “transnational feminist practices... have become the dominant modality of feminist movements around the world.” The turn to the term “transnational,” as opposed to “international” or “global,” has also been shaped by critiques of the importance of the nation-state as the site of feminist action. Conway (2008:210), for example, argues that the use of “transnational” often signals attention to “the circulation of feminist discourse across various kinds of difference without reinscribing national(ist) boundaries or invoking a global-to-local hierarchy among scales of activism.” There is, however, some ambiguity in the usage of the term. Mackie (2001:184) notes, for example, that it is not always clear whether transnational activism refers to organizing that “‘transcends’ the national” or whether it simply refers to “actions that cross national borders.”

The idea of “global” feminism was used in many of the earliest treatments of contemporary transnational feminist activism to highlight women’s shared experience of patriarchy and its potential for creating solidarity among women around the world. Morgan’s (1984) Sisterhood is Global exemplifies this perspective. In part, Morgan’s work was driven by a desire to recognize the global reach of feminist ideas and organizing and to challenge the idea that feminism was only applicable to American or Western European women. In her essay introducing the anthology, Morgan argues that women’s common experiences, such
as a sense of shared oppression, form the basis for women’s global solidarity. She highlights how women around the world face negative stereotypes, the devaluing of women’s reproductive roles, the double-day burden of work and family, and violence against women. For Morgan and other adherents to the “global sisterhood” perspective, women have far more commonalities than differences, and these commonalities form the basis for constructing a united global women’s movement. *Sisterhood is Global*, which covers 70 countries and includes contributions from activists, parliamentarians, journalists, scholars, former heads of state, and others, widely influenced the study of women’s movements, sparking considerable scholarly debate.

The global sisterhood perspective adopted in the text has been criticized for promoting an essentialist, homogenous view of women that ignores class, ethnic, racial, and caste divisions. In a critique of Morgan’s introductory essay, Mohanty (1992:78) writes, for example: “Universal sisterhood is produced in Morgan’s text through specific assumptions about women as a cross-culturally singular, homogeneous group with the same interests, perspectives and goals and similar experiences.” These critiques have spurred intersectional analyses that highlight how women’s multiple identities shape their needs and interests (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Basu 1995; Narayan 1997; Kaplan, Alarcon, and Moallem 1999; Mendoza 2002).

The global sisterhood approach has also been criticized for ignoring hierarchies that exist within the global women’s movement and for masking Northern/Western domination of transnational feminist movements. For Mohanty (1992:83), “Universal sisterhood, defined as the transcendence of the ‘male’ world, thus ends up being a middle-class, psychologized notion which effectively erases material and ideological power differences within and among groups of women, especially between First and Third World women (and, paradoxically, removes us all as actors from history and politics).” Narayan (1998) contends that the cultural imperialism embedded in some global feminist perspectives leads both to assumptions of false similarities among women and to essentializing differences between First and Third World women. Critics saw the “global sisterhood” approach replicating the practices of a type of feminist imperialism that positioned Western women as saviors of Third World women, promoted Western lifestyles and liberal democracies as the most enlightened form of governance, and showed a lack of understanding of race and racism and a resistance to interrogating the cultural specificity of Western societies (Mohanty 1992; Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Hawkesworth 2006).

The scholarship on the historical development of women’s international activism has been beset by many of the same issues identified in examinations of more contemporary activism, including problems of false universalism, dominance of Western and European women, and concerns about a false sense of “global sisterhood.” The first generation of scholarship on the roots of international women’s activism has certainly focused on the dominance of what Rupp (1994:1576) has called Europe and “neo-Europe” (United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). She notes that while the three dominant international women’s organizations of the early 1900s, the International Council of Women (ICW), the International Alliance of Women (IAW), and the Women’s International League
for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), all “proclaimed their openness to women of all continents, religions, political affiliations, occupations, and colors,” their leadership and membership through World War I remained heavily dominated by not only Western women, but also elite women within these countries. Organizations also had a decidedly Protestant slant, even though there were some prominent leaders of different religions including Jews, Catholics, and Muslims (Rupp 1994:1573). These organizations and their leaders often promoted an essentialized understanding of women as different from men in order to use gender difference as a basis for feminist organizing and solidarity. Feminist organizations drew on women’s roles as mothers to promote pacifism and the rejection of war, militarism, and violence (Rupp 1994). Some Western women leaders were willing to question traditional attitudes toward “Third World women” and to engage in a fundamental critique of the role of the West in issues of colonial and imperial dominance and in racist thinking. Often, though, women in these organizations continued to adhere to a version of “orientalism” that saw Western women as embodying the natural leadership, education, and civility that supposedly made Western society superior (Jayawardena 1995; Hawkesworth 2006).

While rejecting an essentialized understanding of women as a basis for organizing, the question of how to create solidarity across national borders remains. Scholars who critique the global sisterhood or global feminism approach emphasize the multiplicity of women’s movements and the existence of transnational feminisms rather than a single global women’s movement. Mohanty (1992:2003), for example, seeks to build a movement through deliberately constructed issue-based coalitions rather than through false analogies of sameness. Grewal and Kaplan (1994:17–18) argue that transnational feminist practices should “compare multiple, overlapping, and discrete oppressions rather than to construct a theory of hegemonic oppression under a unified category of gender.” Narayan (1998) calls for the restoration of history and politics to feminist analyses as a way of addressing both gender and cultural essentialism.

Morgan acknowledges critiques of the global sisterhood approach but argues that these criticisms are a conscious attempt to divide women and marginalize their global influence. She challenges scholars who contend that feminism is a Western concept and those who argue that women are so divided along class, racial, ethnic, and caste lines that they have relatively little in common, arguing that nongender-based perspectives, such as class-based analyses, are incomplete. For Morgan, arguments that feminism is a Western concept ignore the reality of indigenous feminist movements. While agreeing with the need for constant vigilance against racist, classist, and heterosexist overgeneralizations in feminist analysis, Okin (1998:2000) also rejects arguments that scholarly and activist attempts to theorize women’s similarities are a form of cultural imperialism, that generalizing always leads to exclusion, and that making claims about universal rights is a project promoted only by Western feminists. She argues that while Western scholars have been focused on women’s differences and challenging “essentialist” accounts of women, Third World feminists and activists have highlighted women’s similar experiences as a way of promoting the concept of women’s human rights.
Transnational activism around violence against women and women’s human rights has drawn persuasive and organizing power from its ability to frame multiple forms of gender oppression under a common umbrella that emphasizes the similarities in women’s experiences (Bunch 1990; Peters and Wolper 1995; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Friedman 2003). Throughout the 1990s, feminist activists and women’s NGOs from across the globe supported universal claims about women’s human rights and saw the implementation of various UN conventions (including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) as an effective mobilizing tool against oppressive national governments (Friedman 2003). As Moghadam (2005:197) notes, transnational feminist activists often choose as a political tactic to “emphasize solidarity and commonality rather than difference.”

Scholars have also argued that a focus on difference often creates and reaffirms the idea that power relations in transnational feminist organizing are mainly divided between Western/non-Western or developing/developed. This focus ignores the power differences that exist within world regions. In particular, scholars have shown that elite women from the developing world often claim to be, or are seen as, representatives for all women of their world region (Alvarez et al. 2002). Additionally, critiques of “global” are built upon an uncritical celebration of local women, knowledge, and action. Grewal and Kaplan (1994:11) warn that that “global-local as a monolithic formation may also erase the existence of multiple expressions of ‘local’ identities and concerns and multiple globalities.” Often the concept of “local” seems to be constructed “as a place of freedom, as opposed to the bureaucratic mire of the national state, which has outlived its usefulness but refuses to die….Local actors are regarded unproblematically as grounded in the ‘cultures’ of these spaces and therefore as speaking in voices that are ‘authentic.’” (Staudt, Rai, and Parpart 2001:1253). Thus, what can be hidden in the celebration of the local is the importance of local power divisions and their implications at the national and international levels, particularly the continuing power of the state to constrain the transnational activities of local feminist organizations (Lyons 2004). There is also growing concern over what types of power relationships might be hidden by the use of “transnational,” as scholars highlight the negative consequences of the focus on the UN as a site of activism, the “NGOization” of feminism, and the creation of “femocrats” that are associated with projects such as gender mainstreaming (Conway 2008:211).

While a certain level of consensus has been achieved (i.e., the use of “international” to designate past activism and the growing dominance of the use of “transnational” for contemporary action), continuing debates over naming practices reveal that questions over how the relationship between past and present mobilizing should be understood, theorized, and examined have not been settled. The complexity and breadth of both past and present feminist activism demands analysis that can flow “dynamically between past, present and future” in order to trace the complex movements “across, beyond and under national boundaries” entailed in transnational feminist activism (DuBois and Oliviero 2009:2).
Questions and debates around the appropriate weight to give to women’s “similarities” and “differences” and the effects of this choice on activism also continue to animate current scholarship on transnational feminist activism and global women’s movements. Scholars are rethinking how identity politics work by placing more emphasis on the importance of creating shared solidarity through “transformative identity politics,” which focus on how identity categories (including “women,” “black women,” “Third World women,” “mestiza”) are outcomes of historically specific political struggles rather than transcendent claims to specific experiences or positions (Weir 2008; Eschle 2001). The recognition of the need for ongoing debates among a multiplicity of actors (Hawkesworth 2006:145) has also led to a growing focus on the importance of democratic processes within transnational feminist activism. Feminist transnational activities (particularly based on practices emerging from black and Third World feminists) could provide broader theoretical and practical frameworks for promoting global democratic practices (Eschle 2001).

Naming Actions and Activities: Social Movements, Transnational Networks and International Nongovernmental Organizations

The importance of naming not only the type of action, but also the type of actors involved has also been taken up in the literature. Women’s involvement in transnational activism has led to similar questions as those faced by scholars of women’s national mobilizations: Are these organizing practices a social movement or something else? Is there any difference between a women’s movement and a feminist movement? What is the relationship between the two? Should all transnational activities organized predominantly by women be seen as feminist? One important area of debate has centered around the relationship between women’s movements and feminist movements at the transnational level. Tarrow (2001:11) defines transnational social movements as “socially mobilized groups with constituents in at least two states, engaged in sustained contentious interaction with power holders in at least one state other than their own, or against an international institution, or a multinational economic actor.” Tarrow argues that transnational social movements are distinguished from other transnational actors not by the issues they address but by their mode of action – contentious politics. Contentious politics includes noninstitutionalized means of challenging authorities. Social movements use protests, demonstrations, boycotts, and other forms of civil disobedience to influence those in power.

The question of differences between women’s activism and feminist activism is also common in the literature. While some scholars use the terms interchangeably, others differentiate feminist movements from broader women’s movements. Beckwith (2001:372), for example, characterizes women’s movements by “the primacy of women’s gendered experiences, women’s issues, and women’s leadership and decision-making. The relationship of women to these movements is direct and immediate; movement definition, issue articulation, and issue resolution are specific to women, developed and organized by them with
Transnational Feminist Activism and Globalizing Women’s Movements

reference to their gender identity” (Beckwith 2001:372). Ferree (2006:6) states that “organizing women explicitly as women to make social change is what makes a ‘women’s movement.’” Both Beckwith and Ferree view feminist movements as a subset of women’s movements. Beckwith (2001:372) believes that feminist movements are marked by “a gendered power analysis of women’s subordination...they contest political, social, and other power arrangements of domination and subordination on the basis of gender.” For Ferree (2006:6), what defines feminism is “activism for the purpose of challenging and changing women’s subordination to men”; feminism is a goal rather than a constituency or strategy. Thus, both Beckwith and Ferree argue for the importance of differentiating between the two. To collapse feminist and women’s activism obscures an important set of questions, including how to account for women’s activism in causes other than women’s equality (such as in peace, environmental, and labor rights movements). Not paying attention to these differences can lead researchers to ignore important investigations into the processes of how to create communities that self-identify as feminist, particularly among women in communities that have rejected the word feminism as too rooted in the privileges of Western societies.

Women have been instrumental actors in the creation of new types of mobilization that have resulted from the processes of globalization. The scholarship on transnational feminist actions has been greatly influenced by Keck and Sikkink’s (1998) concept of transnational advocacy networks (TANs). Keck and Sikkink (1998:2) argue that TANs include “those relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services.” TANs frequently bring together multiple kinds of actors, such as social movements, international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), and more nationally or locally based actors. One of the advantages of current conceptualizations of TANs is the recognition of the shifting and informal structures of much transnational activity. Increasingly, TANs are not seen as “alternatives to social movements or INGOs” but are used to designate “the informal and shifting structures through which NGO members, social movement activists, government officials, and agents of international institutions can interact and help resource-poor domestic actors to gain leverage in their own societies” (Tarrow 2001:13). Moghadam (2005:4) defines TFNs as “structures organized above the national level that unite women from three or more countries around a common agenda, such as women’s human rights, reproductive health and rights, violence against women, peace and antimilitarism, or feminist economics.” The idea of the TFN has been particularly useful in capturing the multitude of types of actors and the relationships between the different groups involved in transnational feminist activism. Much of the subsequent work discussed in this essay focuses on the study and contributions of TFNs as the primary actors calling attention to gender issues in the international arena and analyzing the connections and interactions between an increasingly dense web of TFNs that spans not only national borders, but often links together local groups and INGOs.
Sites of Activism and the Targets of Organizing: Nation-state vs. Global Governance

One of the fundamental questions facing activists is where to target their activities. Consequently, one focus of scholarship on transnational feminist activism is mapping the different sites of organizing and targets of activists. Women from diverse locations have turned to the global level for numerous reasons. Some have sought to transcend or combat their exclusion from national political processes. Others have been engaged in a search for new communities and contacts that share a critique of male domination and a commitment to gender equality. Still others have been on the lookout for new colleagues with whom to exchange ideas and tactics (Hawkesworth 2006:65). In turning to the global level, women forge new spaces of political participation, new identities for women, and new tools that can be used to promote a feminist agenda at both national and international levels.

The earliest international women’s organizations focused their attention on promoting changes at the level of the nation-state (Rupp 1997). While women activists were interested in creating identities that were not bound by national borders, the nation-state was still the entity that controlled women’s unequal access to education, legal and political rights, and labor options; therefore, international organizations directed their energies towards changing national laws. Scholars who examine international women’s organizing during the late 1800s and early 1900s have stressed the importance of international ties as a strategy in broader feminist efforts to promote national change (Rupp 1997, 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998; McFadden 1999; Anderson 2000). Women who were part of the earliest international organizing built ties through personal correspondence, newspapers and leaflets, and through a series of international conventions. Anderson (2000) argues that international feminist activism was born in the socialist and abolitionist circles of the early 1800s when women engaged in these organizations launched a series of national organizations, newspapers, and speaking tours that quickly reached across borders as like-minded women sought strategic alliances with one another to promote women’s equality and combat gender discrimination. While women in the United States met nationally at Seneca Falls to publicly demand political and economic rights for women, socialist women involved in the 1848 revolutions in France, Germany, Austria, England and across Europe were demanding recognition of women’s rights as both women and workers (Anderson 2000; Offen 2000).

Seeking to sustain and expand international contacts established in the first international expositions on women’s rights (London (1851) and Paris (1867, 1878)), women’s activists began to form associations that would bring women together from various countries on a regular basis and could develop strategic actions around a set of specific goals. The struggle for women’s suffrage was an early model of transnational feminist organizing. The creation of the International Women’s Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) in 1904, later known as the International Alliance of Women (IAW), was driven by the refusal of the International Council of Women to support the more radical demands of women’s suffrage and
political equality as opposed to educational and legal reforms of women’s civil status (Rupp 1997; Bolt 2004). The increasing resistance to colonial rule and the emergence of new countries in the global South influenced activism by women and women’s international organization actively courted “members and national sections” from outside of the West (Rupp 1994:1580). Following World War I, “women from Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa increasingly found their voices” around the issues of suffrage (Rupp 1997:578). While the achievement of voting rights for women in many European and North American states led to the demobilization of some activists in the IWSA and the IWC, the issue of suffrage continued to motivate many women to participate in international activism. The international campaigns to promote women’s suffrage thus represent a classic example of a type of political strategy where the focus of international organizing is directed at changing particular national laws (Rupp 1997).

Currently, transnational feminist activists and global women’s movements continue to organize internationally with the express purpose of changing national policies. TFNs working on changes in women’s political representation and economic access have continued to focus on promoting changes at the level of the nation-state. The push by women’s groups to increase women’s political power has led to international campaigns for gender quotas (Krook 2006). Attempts to implement gender mainstreaming and to increase a gender and development focus in national funding also highlight the critical role the state can play in promoting and protecting women’s rights and interests (True and Mintrom 2001). Gender quotas, gender mainstreaming, and gender and development all highlight the important role the state can play in promoting and protecting women’s rights and interests.

Powerful international organizations are also targets of action. Even before the League of Nations was officially created in 1920, national and international groups, such as the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), had begun to campaign for women’s participation and equality, for international agreements on the trafficking of women and children, and for labor protections like wage equality between men and women working at the new institution (Stienstra 1994:60). With its creation, the United Nations became a central focus of feminist activism. Feminist activists and organizations were critical in inserting women and women’s concerns into the founding documents of the UN and its institutional design. Dedicated women diplomats, such as Bertha Lutz (Brazil) and Minerva Bernadino (Dominican Republic) – both of whom had extensive experience in the Inter-American Commission on the Status of Women – along with others, managed to insert a statement on women’s equal rights in the preamble and to press for nondiscrimination clauses in the UN Charters. Despite opposition from the United States, and ironically from Eleanor Roosevelt, coalitions of women diplomats from Latin America, Asia, and Europe and early transnational feminist organizations like the International Alliance of Women managed to pass an equal rights resolution and to establish an independent Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Recent scholarship has traced how women in and committed to the CSW mobilized within the UN to assert their independence and power and how the CSW’s activities and projects promoted both national women’s movements and transnational feminist activism (Stienstra 1994; Fraser 1995).
Increasingly, scholarship is expanding to examine how activists and networks operating transnationally have targeted powerful international economic institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Activists have critiqued the disproportionate burden that neoliberal and structural adjustment policies (SAPs) place on women, particularly poor women in developing countries, and highlighted the need to mainstream gender in aid plans (Antrobus 2004; Moghadam 2005; True 2008).

In addition, there has been a growing recognition by researchers of the important role that transborder activism within world regions plays in affecting women’s organizing at the local, national, and transnational levels (Alvarez et al. 2002:538; Tripp 2005). Historical scholarship has started to examine the role of formal and informal regional networks of women outside of Europe and the United States before World War II. Pioneering work by Lavrin (1995) reveals not only the national trajectories of feminist movements in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, but also the web of connections that women activists developed across Latin America. Like their American and European counterparts, international congresses such as the First International Feminine Congress in 1910, provided opportunities for Latin American feminists and women activists to discuss issues of women’s rights, legal status, labor rights, education and health (Lavrin 1995:29–32). These congresses helped to create and sustain networks around women’s issues and influenced the development of feminist activism at the national and regional levels. The strength of intraregional ties between feminist activists in Latin America supported the development of the Inter-American Commission on Women (IACW) as part of the Pan-American Union in the 1933. The IACW was the first intergovernmental organization (with official members appointed by member states) to advance women’s rights and played a foundational role in the inclusion of women’s rights in the early years of the UN. It helped develop experienced women’s leaders and provided models for the first women’s rights treaties, including the 1954 Convention of the Political Rights of Women (Fraser 1995; Miller 1999; DuBois and Derby 2009). The work on the importance of Latin American regional networks in shaping the development of feminist activists and organizations within both national contexts and international venues highlights the continuing need for research on the historical roots of regional networks in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the former Eastern Bloc countries.

An emerging area of scholarship highlights the contributions of contemporary regional women’s networks. In Africa, regional women’s networks promoted the adoption of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (Adams and Kang 2007). Feminist activists in Latin America have been gathering since 1981 in a series of informal, intraregional meetings called Encuentros (encounters) in an attempt to “build solidarity, devise innovative forms of political praxis,” and develop discourses at an intraregional level (Alvarez et al. 2002:538). In Europe, regional networks are using European Union (EU) institutions to expand gender equality rights in the region (Tarrow 2005). Although individuals do not have direct access to the European Court of Justice (ECJ), for example, regional women’s groups work with domestic courts to refer gender equality cases to the ECJ. And between
1970 and the late 1990s, the ECJ reviewed 177 cases involving gender equality (Cichowski 2001:122; Tarrow 2005:153).

Transnational feminist activism and global women’s movements have also increasingly directed their attention to the place of women and feminism within a growing transnational antiglobalization movement, including mass protests around meetings of powerful political (G7, G20) and financial organizations (World Bank) as well as the formation of new transnational networks such as the World Assembly of Social Movements, World March of Women, and the World Social Forum (Marchand 2003; Gouws 2007; Wilson 2007; Conway 2008). As early pioneers in using transnational connections to foster social change, women’s movements and feminist activists have, according to Desai (2007:98), “shaped the spaces of global politics” by “providing theoretical frameworks, organizational structures and strategies,” by engaging, exploiting, and critiquing the changing global economic structures. While noting the “contradictory” impact of globalization for women, Moghadam (1999:369) also argues that the “singular achievement of globalization is the proliferation of women’s movements at the local level, the emergence of transnational feminist networks working at the global level, and the adoption of international conventions.”

Transnational feminist activism should be seen as both creating and acting in the globalization process. Recently, however, many scholars have identified worrying trends around the marginalization of women, women’s issues, and feminist analysis in emerging antiglobalization movements and the scholarship on these movements (Eschle 2001; 2005; Moghadam 2005; Wilson 2007). Moghadam (2005) notes, for example, that the antiglobalization literature often overlooks feminist mobilization, and Wilson (2007) argues that the relationship between current antiglobalization movements and feminism sometimes repeats troubling historical patterns of the relationship between leftist movements and women’s movements. Too often, work on women’s movements and gender issues is marginalized or ghettoized within the broader literature on globalization, rather than recognized as an integral element of all transnational issues and movements.

These tensions can clearly be seen in the growing scholarship around the World Social Forums (WSF). Beginning in Brazil in 2001, the World Social Forum was conceived as a response to the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland where the political and economic leaders of powerful states and organizations meet to discuss the world economy and to promote an agenda of greater free trade and free market capitalism. The WSF has become a central “open space” for groups and activists committed to “alter-globalization,” which pays attention to issues of social justice, economic equality, and anticolonial politics. Feminist analysis, however, is not central to the core politics and political understandings promoted by the WSF, and the forum’s most visible leaders are mostly male. Important transnational feminist groups have had a limited role in organizing committees of the WSF (Wilson 2007). Sometimes, feminist participants have complained that the men organizing the WSF “act like we need a room of our own rather than they need to be in the room with us. I feel like we are in a parallel universe” (Wilson 2007:14).
The WSF, however, does succeed in providing a space for a multiplicity of progressive agendas and groups. Attention to women’s, gender, and feminist issues is a direct result of the organizing and commitment of both local women’s groups and transnational feminist networks. The efforts of feminist groups from Latin American and South Asia, including the demand for equal representation of women on panels, greatly increased the visibility of feminist issues and created space for more feminist voices (Wilson 2007: 14). Influenced by the experiences of women’s movements with national independence movements and leftist political parties, the Feminist Dialogues represent attempts to both influence the agenda of the WSF and to maintain an autonomous space for feminist organizing, thus taking up the theme of “double militancy” or the “double challenge” of feminist activism within broader social justice movements (Alvarez, Faria, and Nobre 2004). While scholars and activists have made important breakthroughs in these areas, there is a need for further dialogue between feminist scholars and those studying globalization more broadly. Feminist perspectives contribute to the broader study of globalization by making women’s activism visible and by raising awareness about the gendered implications of major transnational issues such as human rights and economic policies.

Both scholars and activists continue to debate whether transnational feminist activists should direct their attention at nation-states, international organizations, other transnational advocacy networks, or at an emerging global civil society. While the nation-state has arguably been the privileged focus of attention to date, the process of globalization has sparked debates about the significance of the state in today’s globalized world and whether transnational corporations and international organizations are replacing the nation-state as sites of power and targets of activism.

Local vs. Global

Scholars have also debated whether the shift from local and national activism to transnational activism has strengthened or weakened national women’s movements. Scholars who see the growth of TFNs and TANs as a positive development examine how activists use these networks to bypass unresponsive states and enlist new allies. Greater transnational involvement, however, is not without its downsides for local and national feminist activists and organizations, including a shift in power toward international donors in setting issue agendas and political strategies.

Keck and Sikkink (1998) view transnational activism as a positive development. According to their boomerang model, when domestic activists are blocked by unresponsive states they call on outside actors, such as nongovernmental organizations, other states, and/or international organizations, to pressure the state to make the desired change. Domestic actors raise the alarm about violations and provide accurate information; outside actors use their leverage to push for policy changes. In examining a TAN focused on violence against women, Keck and Sikkink argue that the TAN successfully framed and drew attention to the issue, influenced the agendas of international conferences, and shaped the discursive positions of states and international organizations (Keck and Sikkink 1998).
Transnational Feminist Activism and Globalizing Women’s Movements

Keck and Sikkink (1998), Moghadam (2000, 2005), True (2008), and True and Mintrom (2001) have also shown how transnational activism provides domestic women’s movements with additional allies and leverage.

Other scholars, however, worry about how involvement in TANs/TFNs maintains larger power differentials between often poor and underfunded local groups and more resource rich TANs/TFNs. TANs/TFNs can perpetuate existing race, class, regional, caste, and sexual hierarchies between women. One specific criticism is that domestic activists often have little agency in shaping how issues are portrayed by TANs/TFNs. Domestic partners raise the initial alarm and provide their transnational partners with accurate information, but it is frequently the international partners who play the key role in pushing for policy change. Scholars and activists have shown that issues involving bodily harm – such as female genital cutting and stoning cases – can fall into patterns of cultural imperialism when Western partners fail to respect the strategies of issue framing and movement strategies put forth by their partners on the ground (Imam and Médar-Gould 2003; Farrell and McDermott 2005; Tripp 2006). Imam and Medar-Gould, for example, called on Amnesty International and other international actors to stop their campaigns against sharia cases in northern Nigeria because they were propagating inaccurate information and threatening the safety of the Nigerian women accused of sharia violations. And the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan charged the Feminist Majority with taking credit for emancipating Afghan women.

Sonia Alvarez (1998; 1999; 2000) also argues that there are trade-offs between local, grassroots mobilization and transnational, professional mobilization. Too great of a focus on transnational mobilization can lead groups to become more attuned to global issues and less concerned with local problems. It can also promote the bureaucratization and “NGOization” of women’s movements, since those groups that successfully compete for resources to participate in international conferences need to have the skills to write successful grant proposals, which often require detailed budgets and numerous follow-up reports. The shift to transnational organizing privileges urban, educated, elite women over rural, grassroots activists. Sperling’s (1999) study of the Russian women’s movement and Sperling, Ferree, and Risman’s (2001) study of TANs and Russian women’s activism argue that a growing reliance on funding from foreign donors is accelerating the bureaucratization process. These studies also find that a reliance on outside funding can influence organizational priorities, encourage the splintering of organizations, and undermine cooperation among national organizations. Thus, a shift to transnational activism and a greater reliance on external support can weaken local and national women’s movements. However, as Alvarez also notes, increasingly “the local and transnational forces...are mutually constitutive” making more nuanced analysis of the relationship between different types of transnational organizing and local impact increasingly important in future scholarship (Alvarez 2000:2).
Tactics, Strategies, and Network Effectiveness

Under what conditions are transnational feminist activities likely to achieve their goals and produce change? This represents an underlying concern for scholars who are politically committed to the goals of transnational feminist activism. Scholars of both historical and contemporary transnational feminist activism seek to identify the conditions under which feminist activists are likely to succeed in shaping the policies of states and international organizations. Scholars differ over which constellation of issues, actors, and target characteristics are most important in determining whether stated goals are achieved. Keck and Sikkink’s extensive work on TANs represents an important foundation for this debate. These authors lay out five stages of effectiveness: (1) issue attention; (2) discursive change; (3) procedural change; (4) changes in policies; and (5) influence on behavior of state and non-state actors. They suggest that TANs will be more effective when they address certain types of issues – specifically those related to bodily harm and vulnerable populations (especially infants and children) and/or involve legal equality of opportunity (Keck and Sikkink 1998:204–5). Comparing the success of violence against women TANs with less successful campaigns related to women and development, women’s reproductive rights, and veiling, they argue that issues related to bodily harm are especially conducive to transnational movements because they seem “to avoid the indifference resulting from cultural relativism and the arrogance of cultural imperialism” (Keck and Sikkink 1998:195).

Other scholars, however, have demonstrated that TANs/TFNs can influence issues not related to bodily harm. In particular, recent scholarship has examined a number of campaigns related to issues of equal opportunity for women. In their study of the proliferation of state bureaucracies for gender mainstreaming, True and Mintrom (2001) assert that transnational networks of non-state actors have fueled the rapid diffusion of gender mainstreaming policies and agencies. They find that transnational networks played a critical role in spreading information on different gender mainstreaming policy models and on the political strategies that could be employed by international organizations and states to promote the adoption of these policies. Krook (2006) argues that transnational factors (specifically international norms spread through transnational mobilization) account for the rapid spread of gender quotas across countries.

Moghadam (2005) also challenges Keck and Sikkink’s hypotheses related to issue characteristics, arguing that women’s networks have had equal levels of success contesting neoliberal economic policies. She argues that TFNs have raised attention about the adverse effects of globalization, SAPs, and international trade agreements on women, and pushed states and IOs to make discursive change. In addition to raising awareness about the gendered effects of global economic policies, Moghadam (2005) finds that these networks have successfully pressed states and IOs to make procedural and policy changes. Moghadam argues that TFNs sparked changes in the World Bank’s policies toward women and influenced how IOs like the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) gather data, leading to the development and use of the gender development index (GDI) and the gender empowerment measure (GEM). Similarly, True (2008) argues that
women’s transnational advocacy networks have made a number of contributions to international economic regimes, including increasing transparency and openness to external participation and improving the quality of discourse around these issues. Skeptics argue that while TFNs working on economic issues have influenced the way that global economic issues are framed and have raised awareness about the ways that these policies and programs harm women, they, like the broader antiglobalization movement, have been unable to spur major policy changes. While IFIs have softened their programs in the wake of widespread criticisms of the effects of SAPs, IFIs and world powers continue to promote broadly neoliberal policies.

This debate raises the issue of “framing.” TANs “frame” issues to make them comprehensible to target audiences, to attract attention and encourage action, and to “fit” with favorable institutional venues” (Keck and Sikkink 1998:2–3). Scholars have also suggested that TANs focused on women’s human rights and violence against women were successful largely because they were able to frame the issue in a way that was relevant to women on both sides of the Equator. Violence against women was conceptualized broadly to include rape, domestic battery, female genital cutting, dowry deaths, amongst other practices. Issue framing overcame North–South divisions within the women’s movement that split women at the international UN women’s conferences in Mexico City (1975) and Copenhagen (1980). Moghadam (2005) argues that TFNs have framed global economic issues in new ways, creating slogans such as “feminization of poverty,” “gender justice and economic justice,” and “engendering development” that have drawn attention to the effects of neoliberal economic policies and spurred action. Petchesky (2003:248) argues, however, that previous gains by feminist activists are increasingly under attack from mobilized transnational networks that include fundamentalist and right-wing religious groups, conservative national governments, and international corporations. Attempts to change current UN policies by promoting sexual abstinence, limiting women’s reproductive choices, and reinstating national, religious, or cultural definitions of women and women’s sexuality directly attack the success of feminist activists in framing health as an issue of women’s rights to control their own bodies and experience sexual pleasure (Petchesky 2003).

Keck and Sikkink (1998:28) also argue that actor characteristics affect whether TANs are effective. Specifically, they contend that “networks operate best when they are dense, with many actors, strong connections among groups in the network, and reliable information flows.” Joachim (2007) highlights the importance of “organizational entrepreneurs” in putting a feminist framing of women’s issues on the UN’s agenda. The inclusion of violence against women and women’s reproductive rights as issues for the UN partly resulted from work by activists from, respectively, the Center for Women’s Global Leadership and the International Women’s Health Coalition (Joachim 2007). The characteristics of the target also influence effectiveness. The targets must be vulnerable to outside pressure for campaigns to succeed. Thus, pariah states and IOs not susceptible to public opinion are less likely to respond to TANs’ efforts.
In addition, there are currently a number of different models for conceptualizing how TFNs influence states and international institutions. In the boomerang model, when domestic NGOs operating in repressive states are unable to influence their governments, they bypass the domestic arena by seeking out international allies to place pressure on their governments from the outside (Keck and Sikkink 1998:12–13). The spiral model, which builds on the boomerang model, consists of several “boomerang throws” as domestic groups and transnational allies move states from denial of human rights abuses to tactical concessions to rule-consistent behavior (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999). Both models “suggest that transnational advocacy networks help strengthen international human rights norms by persuading foreign governments and international organizations to sanction noncompliant governments” (Adams and Kang 2007:454). Zippel’s (2004) case study of sexual harassment policy within the European Union also expands the boomerang model. Zippel (2004:66) finds that within the EU’s multilevel governance system, activists use a series of boomerangs to create a ping-pong effect, working back and forth between national and international contexts. When activists are unsuccessful at the national level, they take an issue to the EU, pressuring it to adopt some sort of policy measure. Activists then use these policy measures (even nonbinding ones) to press for national change. Once a state adopts a national policy on the issue, activists then take the law back to the EU to press for stronger EU policies. Zippel’s study is just one demonstration of how scholarship on transnational feminist activism yields new models of how transnational networks operate, of why they change over time, and of why they succeed at some points while failing at others.

Transnational feminist activists continue to be at the forefront of attempts to create more just, democratic, and equitable societies within ongoing processes of globalization. The explosion of scholarship on transnational feminist activism over the past thirty years discussed in this essay documents the creation of a new field of study that can be expected to continue to develop its own research agendas and to influence how transnational politics and globalization are studied in other fields.

References


Transnational Feminist Activism and Globalizing Women’s Movements


Transnational Feminist Activism and Globalizing Women’s Movements


Transnational Feminist Activism and Globalizing Women’s Movements


Transnational Feminist Activism and Globalizing Women’s Movements


Transnational Feminist Activism and Globalizing Women’s Movements


**Links to Digital Materials**

Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID). At [www.awid.org/](http://www.awid.org/), accessed July 2009. AWID is an international feminist organization that promotes gender equality, sustainable development, and women’s human rights. Provides links to coverage of women’s human rights in newspapers and other media sources and includes overviews of women’s human rights issues sorted by region and topic.

Center for Women’s Global Leadership (CWGL). At [www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/](http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/), accessed July 2009. Founded in 1989 at Rutgers University, the CWGL promotes women’s leadership and women’s human rights around the world. Provides an overview of CWGL policy and advocacy efforts in the areas of leadership development and women’s human rights and links to CWGL publications and women’s human rights resources.

Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN). At [www.dawnnet.org/](http://www.dawnnet.org/), accessed July 2009. Founded in 1984, DAWN critiqued existing development paradigms. DAWN’s research themes include the political economy of globalization; sexual and reproductive health and rights; and political restructuring and social transformation. Provides information on DAWN’s advocacy initiatives and links to publications and resources.


Global Database of Quotas for Women. At [www.quotaproject.org](http://www.quotaproject.org), accessed July 2009. This site, a joint project by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) and Stockholm University, provides information on gender quotas by country and quota type. Includes general information on quotas, a list of global and regional...
resources on quotas, links to IDEA Publications and Stockholm University Working Papers, and a quota discussion board.

Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM). At www.portal.oas.org/Portal/Topic/Comisi%C3%B3nInteramericanaMujeres, accessed June 2009. Founded in 1928, the CIM is composed of 34 Principal Delegates, appointed by their respective national governments. It works to support and recognize national women’s movements throughout the Americas and to foster inter-American cooperation.

International Alliance of Women (IAW). At www.womenalliance.org, accessed July 2009. Founded in 1902 and composed of national branches, the IAW works for women’s equality, women’s human’s rights, and women’s political participation, democracy and economic justice. Includes information on the history, principles, and current projects of the IAW and provides contact information for national branches.

International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN). At www.igtn.org/, accessed July 2009. Provides an overview of the organizational structure, membership, and issues addressed by the IGTN. It also includes analyses of various trade agreements, including the World Trade Organization, the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Free Trade Area of the Americas, and other regional and bilateral trade agreements.

International Women’s Tribune Center (IWTC). At www.iwtc.org/, accessed July 2009. The IWTC was founded in 1976 after the 1975 Mexico City conference. The IWTC supports women’s organizations by providing communication, information, education, and organizing assistance. The website includes publications, links and resources, and information on UN activities related to women’s and gender issues.


Isis International-Manila (Isis). At www.isiswomen.org/, accessed July 2009. Isis is a feminist organization focused on increasing Southern women’s participation in information and communication networks. The website includes access to Isis publications, information on its various campaigns, and links to resources that promote women’s participation in media.

Pan Pacific and South-East Asia Women’s Association (PPSEAWA). At www.ppseawa.org, accessed July 2009. Founded in 1928, the PPSEAWA’s mission is to promote peace, education, health, and environmental balance for women and children in the Asia-Pacific region. The PPSEAWA is composed of national chapters from 23 member countries around the Pacific region.


**Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank Elaine Howard Ecklund, John Scherpereel, Brooke Ackerly, Spike Peterson, and the reviewers for their helpful feedback on drafts of this essay.

**Melinda Adams**
Department of Political Science, James Madison University

**Gwynn Thomas**
Deptartment of Global Gender Studies, University at Buffalo (SUNY)