

### Early (Mistaken) Assumptions About Women's Movements

Until recently, Western feminist academics dominated the study of women's movements.<sup>1</sup> Typically, they focused on movements in the United States and Europe and rarely on movements in postcolonial countries (Basu, 1995). These analyses often overemphasized the role of middle-class women, the role of economic development, and particular types of activities such as a focus on reproductive rights. This narrow definition left out movements that didn't fit this Western mold. Some Western scholars portrayed women

<sup>1</sup> The "West" or "Western nations" is sometimes used to refer to the industrialized nations of Western Europe and North America (the U.S. and Canada).

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in developing nations as passive and without agency (Mohanty, 1991; Xu, 2009). However, there is a long history of struggle for women's equality in the Middle East, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe; economic development is no guarantee of a strong women's movement; and women's movements comprise a range of struggles by women against gender inequality (Basu, 1995; Bystydzienski, 1992a; deHann, Daskalova, & Loutfi, 2006; Keddie, 2007; Tripp et al., 2009).

#### *Assuming That All Women's Movements Use the Feminist Label*

It also took a while for Western scholars to recognize that women's movements include individuals and groups that do not explicitly identify as feminist. Some women's movements embrace the feminist label, such as the Association of Women for Action and Research (Singapore), Action India, the Feminist Majority (United States), and Bat Shalom (Israel). However, many women's organizations that do the work of the women's movement avoid the feminist label or consider it irrelevant to the work they do.

One reason for avoidance of the feminist label is that feminism has a negative connotation in many cultures. In countries with a history of colonization (many African countries), or other antagonistic relationships with the West (many Muslim countries), the effectiveness of openly feminist organizations may be compromised by the public perception that feminism is a Western, imported notion. In countries like Iran and Egypt, Islamists will suggest that a group has ties to the West to discredit women's rights efforts (Keddie, 2007). In China, many in the women's movement prefer the term "womanism" to the term "feminism" not only to distinguish it from Western feminism but because it is seen as representing a less antagonistic view of gender relations (Xu, 2009). In other countries, antifeminist groups have successfully given feminism a negative image such that many with feminist leanings do not call themselves "feminists." For example, in the United States, many women's activists and organizations are "covertly" feminist because of the perception that support for women's policies and programs is reduced by association with the feminist label.

In a number of Latin American countries where socialist struggles have resulted in democratization, feminism is associated with the bourgeoisie (the middle and upper class) and imperialism. In Chile, for instance, feminists are considered bourgeois and elitist and insufficiently committed to the interests of the working class (Frohmann & Valdes, 1995). In Bolivia, feminism is viewed as alien to the working class and as divisive to the labor movement (Salinas, 1994). Similarly, feminist activists in Nicaragua often avoid the feminist label because feminism is often portrayed in the media as anti-family and anti-male, and the traditional Latin American political left believes feminism to be bourgeois and inappropriate for women in a poor country like Nicaragua (Chinchilla, 1994).

Many women's movements also avoid the feminist label because the term *feminism* is frequently associated with a narrow, Western view of women's issues and strategies. Women in some countries, including Poland, Russia,

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"This demonization of feminism as Western totally ignores the fact that for more than two decades women of Asia, Africa, Latin American, and the Middle East have been creating their own contextualized forms of feminism and speaking about their rights and demands in their own voices."

*Rosemary Ruether*

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"Every country has women's rights groups."

*Mahnaz Afkhami*

and Honduras, distance themselves from Western feminism because it is not seen as relevant to their own social and economic conditions (Sekhon & Bystydzienski, 1999). Many non-Western women feel that their struggle as women is connected to the struggles of their communities against racism, economic exploitation, and imperialism and believe that Western feminism does not address this. In other words, Western feminism has often ignored intersectionality, and to many non-Western women, it is seen as too singularly focused on the struggle against gender discrimination when their oppression cannot be limited to gender alone (Ghodsee, 2004; Johnson-Odim, 1991). As Mohanty (1991) says, "To define feminism purely in gendered terms assumes our consciousness (or identity) of being 'women' has nothing to do with race, class, nation, or sexuality, just gender. But no one becomes a woman purely because she is female. Ideologies of womanhood have as much to do with class and race as they have to do with sex" (p. 12). For instance, Black South African feminism is based on Black women's experience of multiple oppressions and includes issues, such as access to clean water and housing, that have not traditionally been defined as feminist (Kemp, Madlala, Moodley, & Salo, 1995).

Non-Western women often distance themselves from Western feminism for other reasons as well. They are often aware, for example, that Western women participated in the oppression of Southern women (Johnson-Odim, 1991; Kemp et al., 1995). It is sometimes difficult for them to think of these feminists as their sisters when these women received privileges on the backs of non-White women (Oyewumi, 2003). They are also cognizant of the fact that racism was present in the early women's movement in the Northern Hemisphere and that, up until recently, these White Western feminists dominated international women's conferences (Johnson-Odim, 1991).

#### *Assuming Western Feminist Concerns Are the Concerns of All Women*

Some of the concerns that have driven Western feminist movements, such as women's reproductive and sexual rights, do not characterize other non-Western feminisms and women's movements. Margolis (1993) gives the example of family planning. In the West, family planning and abortion have served as major mobilizing forces for the women's movement, but such programs often arouse suspicion and opposition from women in some developing nations, who may see these as attempts to limit the populations of their ethnic groups. This approach also does not make sense to women in countries where women's status is enhanced by having lots of children or where women need lots of children to help with the labor. Indeed, in contrast to Western feminisms that often focus on women in the public sphere of work and politics and women's reproductive and sexual rights, the focus of many Latin American, South American, and African feminisms and women's movements is motherhood (Oyewumi, 2003). Islamic feminists often argue that Western feminism, with its emphasis on equality in the labor force and White middle-class women, is irrelevant to the majority of the world's women, who seek an honored place as wives and as mothers (Afshar, 1996).


African feminisms are also often shaped by African women's resistance to Western hegemony (domination) and by African culture. Like African feminists, women working toward equality in Muslim countries frequently distinguish themselves from Western feminists to avoid charges that they have been influenced by "foreign" or Western ideologies (Keddie, 2007; Moghadam, 1991). Their efforts are often centered on recovering their own women's history and showing that women's equality is consistent with Islam (Keddie, 2007; Moghadam, 1991, 2003). Some non-Western feminisms are even rooted in a precolonial past in which women played strong roles and were high in status. For example, the creation of the first woman, according to the indigenous people of the Philippines, was simultaneous with the creation of the first man. Filipina feminists refer to this to show that as a person born whole and separate from man, the Filipina owns her body and self and can chart her own history and destiny (Santiago, 1995).

Because feminist struggles occur in unique cultural contexts unable to be fully understood by outsiders, women in their own cultures create the most effective women's movements. It is these women who know how to frame women's rights in cultural context. Also, associations with "outsiders" often compromise the legitimacy and, correspondingly, the effectiveness of movements. Feminist outsiders mean well when they try to change practices in other cultures, but at times they may unwittingly interfere with gender progress and other women's right to self-determination. Indeed, as you've read earlier in the book, those who are best suited to engineer and bring about lasting reform are typically women in their own cultures (Obiora, 2003). Box 10.3 summarizes the reasons why Western feminisms are not easily exportable to non-Western cultures. As this chapter proceeds, it will become increasingly evident that women's movements should be contextualized and have taken many forms.

#### **Different Strands of Women's Movements**

Even within a country, women's movements take many forms and employ many strategies. Consider this example from Alvarez (1994) describing the Brazilian women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s:

Women spearheaded protests against the regime's human rights violations; poor and working-class women crafted creative solutions to meet community needs in response to gross government neglect of basic urban and social services; women workers swelled the ranks of Brazil's new trade union movement; rural women struggled for their rights to land that were increasingly being usurped by export-agribusiness; Afro-Brazilian women joined the United Black Movement and helped forge other organized expressions of a growing antiracist, Black-consciousness movement; Brazilian lesbians joined gay males to launch a struggle against homophobia; young women and university students enlisted in militant student movements; some took up arms against the military regime, and still others worked in legally sanctioned parties of the opposition. By the


**BOX 10.3** Differences Between Western and Other Feminisms

- Western feminism may not apply to cultures with different economic and social conditions.
- Non-Western feminisms are often tied to other struggles (e.g., racism, poverty, imperialism) that are seen as equally important.
- Non-Western women do not always trust Western feminists because Western feminists have historically excluded women from developing nations from international conferences and non-Western women often come from countries with a history of imperialism.
- Motherhood is often central to non-Western feminisms.
- Non-Western feminisms are often rooted in precolonial past.
- Arab feminisms are often rooted in Islam.
- Western feminism is viewed suspiciously as a possible effort to impose Western culture.
- Association with Western feminism often hurts Southern hemisphere and Arab feminist efforts.

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"Feminism in Mexico, as elsewhere, is not expressed in a single voice."

*Victoria Rodriguez*

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"Because of cultural and historical differences, it would be naïve to assume that Indian women fight for change in the same ways American and European women did."

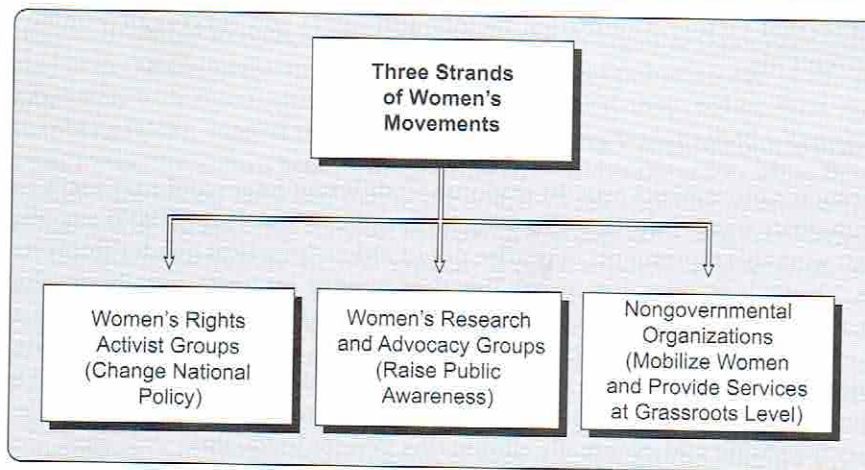
*Mangala Subramaniam*

1980s, thousands of women involved in these and other struggles had come to identify themselves as feminists (p. 13).

Three major "strands" of women's movements (see Figure 10.1) are found in many countries: (1) women's rights activist groups that raise women's issues at the national policy level; (2) women's research and advocacy organizations that raise public awareness; and (3) nongovernmental organizations that work to raise women's awareness and mobilize women at the grassroots level (Jahan, 1995b). Furthermore, these different types of groups often build coalitions in order to create change. Jahan (1995b) describes these three major strands in Bangladesh in her discussion of campaigns to eliminate violence against women in Bangladesh (from the late 1970s to early 1980s). Researchers documented violence against women, grassroots groups started intervention programs, and women's organizations pressured the government to enact laws against that violence.

Large, national organizations focused on legislative change are perhaps the most visible of the three "strands." For example, from the early to mid-twentieth century, women's organizations on every continent won women the right to vote. Another example of change sought by a large, national women's organization is Bangladesh's largest women's organization, Mahila Parishad. This organization collected 17,000 signatures and lobbied parliament for an antidowry law, which was passed in 1980. Likewise, the Concertación Nacional de Mujeres por la Democracia (National Coalition of Women for Democracy, or CNMD), a coalition of women's organizations in Chile, successfully lobbied to include women's issues on the agenda of the new democratic government formed in 1990. As you learned in Chapter 9, women's organizations have also played a major role in getting women's rights and parliamentary gender quotas enshrined in new Constitutions.

FIGURE 10.1 Three Strands of Women's Movements



Despite the visibility of large national women's organizations, the vitality of women's movements lies primarily in small, local-level activist groups (Basu, 1995; Katzenstein, 1987). As discussed in Chapter 6, these grassroots organizations (GROs) include small, local-level groups that provide services such as shelter to battered women or credit to female micro-entrepreneurs, or engage in local protests or awareness campaigns. Grassroots support organizations (GRSOs) are another type of nongovernmental organization characteristic of women's movements worldwide. Recall that GRSOs are nationally or regionally based assistance organizations that channel funds and information to grassroots organizations; GRSOs are usually staffed by professionals. In every chapter you have encountered many examples of GROs and GRSOs that respond to women's issues.

Bystydzienski (1992a) suggests that in countries with a women's movement, there are generally two branches: an established older branch made up of organizations that have become institutionalized and that are more or less accepted as the mouthpiece for women's rights; and a younger, noninstitutionalized branch made up of small, loose groups outside of the mainstream. The older branch, she maintains, tends to be more ideologically liberal or moderate and essentially struggles for changes in laws and policies within the existing society. This branch also tends toward a hierarchical structure with some role specialization and formal rules. In contrast, the younger branch is more ideologically radical and seeks transformation of existing societies according to feminist principles. It consists of small, local groups, often linked by informal networks, and avoids formal rules and hierarchies. The activities of the younger branch focus on building alternatives outside of the system, such as cooperatives run by women, economic enterprises, women's shelters, health clinics, and daycare centers.