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Feminist protests and politics in a world in crisis

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Global feminism has moved further into protest mode and built broader alliances. Duncan Green selects extracts from the latest 'Gender and Development' issue that explore these shifts in greater detail.

The latest issue of [Gender and Development](#) just dropped, and it's on 'Feminist Protests and Politics in a World in Crisis' (Open Access). With academic journals, I must confess, I rarely read beyond the overview/introduction, but there's some excellent and (to me at least) new insights in this one, by [Sohela Nazneen](#) and [Awino Okech](#). Here are some of the extracts that most hit home (subheadings mine).

Feminism has moved more into protest mode, and built broader alliances

'Protests have become the leading route through which feminist movements have organised against austerity, corruption and authoritarian regimes across

Europe, the United States of America, Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Carnegie's global protest tracker shows that as of September 2021, 230 anti-government protests took place worldwide across 110 countries, with 78 per cent of authoritarian regimes being the centre of significant protests. Accompanying these protests is the use of digital platforms that have aided intergenerational, transnational, cross-movement organising, by facilitating both online and offline mobilisation.

From the Movement for Black Lives, #MeToo and climate justice activism, we are also witnessing an exponential growth in transnational and intergenerational organising. Struggles for freedom and justice are being linked. Feminists and gender justice activists are responding to crises and their disruptive effects. They are seizing the opportunity to reimagine democracy, gender relations, power relations and humanity. Feminist organising ranges from issues such as the cost of living, violence against women, denial of abortion rights, LGBTQI rights, weakening democracy, environmental crises, immigration laws, police brutality and unpaid and invisible care work. We have observed feminist organising contribute to changes in autocratic governments such as in Sudan, toppling a corrupt and homophobic administration in Puerto Rico, and the ushering in of abortion rights in Catholic-majority countries such as Ireland and Argentina. However, these forms of dissent have also invited brutal repression in Belarus, Hong Kong, India, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe, to mention just a few examples.'

The bad guys have noticed and started stealing feminism's clothes

'Using the idea of 'symbolic glue' in this issue, Daria Colella turns the spotlight on Italy, and examines how nationalist forces co-opt feminist agendas. She unpacks 'femonationalism' in Italy by examining how right-wing political parties systematically frame campaign materials and deploy media strategies to paint Black and people of colour, especially those from Muslim background, as perpetrators of violence against women, and as belonging to an inferior culture that devalues women's rights, thus posing a danger both to white Italian women and the immigrant women who belong to this culture.'

Intergenerational tensions within feminism

Invariably, what also emerges in several of the articles are the tensions that exist along generational lines, and the differences in modes of organising deployed by younger and older activists. In her article, Manjima Bhattacharjya argues that much of the tension within the Indian feminist movement 'relates to the modes of engagement used by newer generations of online activists, rather than political differences'. The younger activists use fluid forms of online organising, including tactics (such as cancel culture, open naming and shaming) that are distinctively different from the older, more institutionalised forms of feminist organising. The younger activists can act without having to raise funds. She argues that this fluid form of organising gives the younger activists a large virtual presence, and make them less reliant on the organisations built by the older generation, but the activism itself remains more ephemeral and vulnerable.

The generational divides in many of the other countries covered in the articles are fractious, particularly in relation to expressions of sexuality, the reformulation of notions of culture, and questioning of gender binary identities. Hadeel Qazzaz's article is an interview with Hayat Mirshad, a younger feminist, and focuses on the trajectory of the Lebanese feminist movement and activism by different generations. Hayat points out that many younger feminists operate independently or have left established women's rights organisations because the space for dissenting views, particularly on sexuality and LGBTQI rights, was absent. For the younger Lebanese feminists, intersectionality remains a key concern. A rallying cry for the younger activists has come from Khawla Bouaziz, a co-founder of the *Mawjoudeen* for LGBTQI! movement in Tunisia, where she urges feminists to take 'lessons on how to become allies.'

Women's leadership

'Against an overwhelming presence of male leaders in formal political systems, recent decades have seen a substantial increase in the number of women in legislative assemblies and in bureaucracies around the world, although in many contexts reaching gender parity in politics remains a distant goal. As the number of women leaders increase, the debates over whether women have a

distinctive style of leadership and policy preference have intensified in public discourse. Are women purposefully elected to represent women's interest? Is this the fundamental reason for increasing women's representation in politics? Is it useful to assume that all women in parliament are interested in pursuing a radical transformative agenda? How do we make sense of the co-option and subversion of affirmative action policies by political parties and political elites to reward proxies? The answer remains inconclusive, yet studies show women representatives *do* exercise voice to raise issues with respect to social welfare, violence against women, and livelihood issues.

Jennifer Piscopo and Malliga Och focus on women leaders at the subnational level—governors, mayors and local elected officials in six countries, where hypermasculine chief executives have created an adverse policy environment. They found that women leaders were consistent in prioritising clear public health communication and taking swift measures to contain the spread of the virus. The women leaders also implemented policies that prioritised the needs of vulnerable community members, especially women and racial and ethnic minorities.'

How change happens

'Using four case studies of national law reform during the presidencies of Corazon Aquino (1986–1992) and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001–2010) in the Philippines, and Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001–2004) in Indonesia, Ramona Vijeyarasa shows that how and when women executives promote gender equality reforms is mediated by various factors. The female vote, the support female presidents receive from high level female officials and female members of parliament in navigating governmental politics in spaces that are closed off to the activists, and the political costs of adopting change – all influence their decisions. The relationship between female presidents and successful gender equality policy reform is not linear. However, women's movements do benefit from having a woman leader in the executive who is interested in gender equality reforms, as these connections open formal political spaces that were previously unreachable.

In a similar vein, in her article, Pragyna Mahpara uses the case of the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010 of Bangladesh to examine ...the

informal relationships between the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the Women's Minister and the leaders of the civil society policy coalition that was critical in enactment of the law. Pragyna Mahpara draws attention to the fact that while policy coalition leaders and female executives were successful in pushing for adoption of the law, their influence at the implementation stage remains limited. Understanding why implementation gaps arise is a critical area of concern in matters related to gender equality policy, as many countries see laws passed but not implemented. Effective implementation relies not only on state capacity and political will at the top, but also on how gender equality policies are interpreted by public servants at different levels, and how frontline workers are monitored, and is also influenced by the patriarchal norms and ideas held by the public servants charged with implementing reforms.'

If these extracts are anything to go by, the full double issue is well worth a visit.

This post was **first published** by Duncan Green on the blog **From Poverty to Power**.

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