

CHAPTER 17

FEMINIST
ORGANIZING: WHAT'S
OLD, WHAT'S NEW?
HISTORY, TRENDS,
AND ISSUES

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FEMINIST organizing is a moving target. Not only are feminists individually on the move, in and out of institutions, offices, and political engagements, but also their collective mobilizations change in character over time. By *feminist organizing* we mean efforts led by women explicitly challenging women's subordination to men. This differs from two broader terms: *women's movements* (movements composed of women seeking social change but not necessarily addressing women's subordination); and *feminism* (concern with women's empowerment, not necessarily collectively organized) (Ferree and Mueller 2004, 577; McBride and Mazur 2010).¹ We do not locate feminist organizing only within women's movements but rather seek to understand shifts in where organizing occurs, the factors behind these shifts, and their consequences for feminist objectives.

We begin by sketching the contours of feminist organizing from the nineteenth century to the present. Borrowing an image from historian Leila Rupp, we see global feminist organizing less like waves and more akin to "choppy seas," with feminist organizing cresting and falling in different parts of the

world at different times (Rupp 1997, 48). This sketch highlights two critical issues in feminist organizing from its earliest periods to the present: how solidarity is constructed, given the intersectionality of feminist claims making; and how the organizational form of feminist mobilization varies as political opportunities change. Taking these processes into account, we end by challenging claims that feminism is demobilized and in decline (see also the chapter by Dhamoon in this volume).

A HISTORY OF GLOBAL FEMINIST ORGANIZING

Once feminist organizing is recognized as global, it becomes harder to see feminist movements as two historical waves (Rupp 1997; Offen 2010a). Instead, local feminist claims—such as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women*—arise in the crucible of revolutionary change, create new collective understandings, and travel as discourses over time and space to be taken up in other sites by women who challenge their own status quo: a process of “vernacularization” (Leavitt and Merry 2009). Feminist organizing is connected globally with other revolutionary movements such as abolitionist, socialist, nationalist, prodemocracy, antiwar, and sexual liberation struggles. These efforts, in which both women and men participate, typically included deliberate change in gender relations. Many were transnational already in the nineteenth century, since anarchists, socialists, and other radicals were deported or emigrated and built new networks in their destinations. For example, “utopian socialists” attempted gender-equalizing communal settlements in the United States in the 1840s and in Spain in the 1930s (Kanter 1972; Ackelsberg 1991), “1848ers” from the failed bourgeois revolutions in Europe fled to North and South America with liberal ideals of civic betterment and democratic participation (Lavrin 1995; Offen 2000; Hewitt 2010a), and deported Italian anarchist women brought their working-class feminism to New Jersey and Buenos Aires in the 1890s (Molyneux 1986; Guglielmo 2010). Many radical movements spawned feminist organizing, benefited from feminist participation, and engaged in struggles over priorities that eventually changed both sides.

Transnational from the Start: From Chattel to Citizen

Historical research has changed the conventional story of women’s suffrage as the first transnational women’s movement, to one among many feminist efforts. Focusing on elite women’s suffrage organizing creates a one-sided story of limited goals (Chafetz, Dworkin, and Swanson 1986; Zimmerman 2010).

But organizers such as Lucretia Mott (a Quaker antislavery campaigner in the United States), Flora Tristán (a French–Peruvian who organized working-class women), and Clara Zetkin (a German who led the International Women’s Socialist Association) challenged the class-based politics of suffrage-centered organizations. They believed that “to truly transform society meant rooting out oppression in all its forms... emancipation of any group—slaves, for instance—was inextricably linked with emancipation for all groups—workers, women, prisoners, and other subjugated peoples” (Hewitt 2010b, 21).

Still, the international women’s suffrage movement played a critical role in early feminist organizing because its organizers were concerned with freeing women from being the property of fathers and husbands and securing for women the rights of free citizens in democratic states. Organizationally, suffrage campaigns developed first where discourses of individual rights offered them the most legitimacy, and early victories came at the periphery (e.g., in New Zealand, Finland, the American West), where institutional authorities had less power (Ramirez, Soyosal, and Shanahan 1997, 737). Suffragists embraced multi-issue visions of social change and developed their skills in other movements, often religious, for education, prison reform, or temperance (Grimshaw 2010; Hammar 2010). Some connected their cause with a wider imperial project of “civilization,” campaigning against indigenous customs defined as barbaric, such as polygamy, foot binding, or women’s uncovered breasts (Burton 1994; Sneider 2008). Feminist antislavery advocates also moved into women-led campaigns against the “white-slave trade,” the trafficking in women’s bodies for prostitution (Offen 2000).

Olive Banks (1981) describes three threads of feminism that emerge in this period: a *moral reform* thread concerned about sexuality and violence against women; a bourgeois *liberal democratic* vision; and a working-class-centered *socialist* ideal. All three threads remain evident in contemporary feminist organizing, although moral reform feminists today often include both secular and religious activists (Smith 2000).

That feminist concerns for social justice in this period crisscross other political agendas is unsurprising. Feminist organizers tried to address the variety of women’s concerns, leading to debates about inclusivity (Taylor 1983). Working-class, African-descent, and Jewish women as well as women of colonized and formerly colonized areas (such as Egypt, India, Latin America) insisted on being heard and forged important transnational networks (Jayawardena 1986; Miller 1991; DuBois 1994; Badran 1995; Rupp 1997). Some groups sought cross-class, cross-race, and cross-cultural understanding, but inclusion remained problematic (Rupp 1996; Offen 2010b). African American women faced recurrent racist insults, as when Susan B. Anthony asked black women activists to stand at the back of suffrage marches (Giddings 1984, 128). Some white Europeans mistakenly thought they needed to save Eastern women (especially Muslims) from oppressive practices such as the harem (Ahmed 1982), part of a broader feminist orientalism, in which U.S. and European women considered themselves more civilized than other women (Rupp 1996). These tensions remain contemporary issues for feminism.

Early struggles also highlight the vexed relation among sexuality, gender relations, and reproduction. In some countries and classes, suffragists participated in radical sexual reform movements that claimed women's sexual citizenship. Some feminists such as Ellen Keys and Helene Stöcker insisted on women's right to refuse sex in marriage and to engage in sex outside of marriage ("free love movements") (Allen 2005; Hammar 2010). In the 1920s, thousands of protestors in German cities protested for legal abortion (Ferree et al. 2002) and radical women in Greenwich Village asserted their rights to equality in marriage and sex without a wedding (Trimberger 1983).

Yet other suffragists embraced the idea of women's sexual morality being higher than men's. Feminists in temperance and home economics movements aimed to protect mothers and wives by elevating the status of domestic work and encouraging men's sexual faithfulness (Laslett and Brenner 1989). Suffragists sometimes made gains when they embraced domesticity, for example, through claims to moral uplift and municipal housekeeping (Gullett 2000; McCammon, Hewitt, and Smith 2004). Feminist claims to recognition of maternal contributions to the public good helped create welfare states (Skocpol 1992; Koven and Michel 1993; Guy 2009), but incorporation in state projects was always controversial among feminists (Cott 1987).

Feminist politics spread and changed in the decades between 1920 and 1960, often seen in the United States and Europe as the "doldrums" for feminist organizing (Taylor and Rupp 1990). Suffrage victories came late in Latin America (1949 in Chile and 1957 in Colombia). In Chile, women's energies then scattered into political parties (Lavrin 1995; Baldez and Kirk 2006), but they sustained cross-class unity in Colombia (Gonzalez 2000). Women's transnational organizing continued after suffrage to fight throughout the twentieth century for labor legislation (Berkovitch 1999), married women's citizenship (DuBois 2010), divorce and child custody (Allen 2005), and jury service (McCammon et al. 2007). Many feminist organizers also turned from suffrage to peace activism in the League of Nations and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (Foster 1989; Rupp 1997). African American women drew inspiration from campaigns linking domestic and global oppressions (Foster 2002). By the 1950s, feminist claims to citizenship succeeded in bringing women's views on issues of war and peace, social welfare, and the economy into public forums.

Embedded or Autonomous? From Citizenship to Self-Determination

In addition to claiming citizenship, women created organizations to challenge gendered power. Their struggles highlight the question of alliances: whether feminist organizing should be primarily autonomous (that is, exclusively via women's movements) or also should use government and other organizations.

Feminist experiences of solidarity and exclusion in social justice movements shaped what today are called theories of intersectionality.

For many feminists, solidarity meant organizing women as women to help themselves, their families, and other women. “Lifting as we climb” was the phrase popularized by the black women’s club movement in the United States for this strategy (Giddings 1984, 97–98); these clubs proliferated in the Jim Crow South and were undeniably feminist in their labors (Gray White 1999, 36). Self-help is a grassroots feminist strategy for empowerment that is neither angry and antimale nor necessarily radical (Purkayastha and Subramaniam 2004). It emerged not only in the 1960s battered women’s shelters and antirape hotlines but also was always a vital means of organizing (Cott 1987).

When women organized in mixed sex groups, they often discovered the political significance of gender and then looked for solidarity with other women in a struggle for feminist objectives (Ferree and Mueller 2004). From the 1950s to the 1970s, feminist organizing was both *embedded* in movements (such as labor unions, anticolonial rebellions, and racial liberation struggles) and *autonomous*, as women split from these multipurpose groups to work in feminist women’s movements. *Autonomous* feminist groups are independently led but often work with other movements, state agencies, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) at scales from the local to the transnational. Autonomous feminist organizing includes formal organizations of and for women and grassroots, women-only collectives (Ferree and Hess 2000). Autonomous feminist organizers are often more controversial than embedded ones, but autonomous women’s movements are never the only focus of feminist organizing (Jakobsen 1998).

Many of feminism’s thinkers and organizers, both the reformers and the more radical, emerged from class-based or race-based political organizations of the Left. In the United States and Europe, labor feminists gained organizing experience in union activities (Kaplan 1992; Cobble 2004; DuPlessis and Snitow 2007). In Europe, women in postwar youth movements were radicalized by their fellow activist men, who were unwilling to fully include them (Katzenstein and Mueller 1987; Boxer 2010). In the United States, not only African American and white but also Latina, Asian American, and Native American women found their efforts to place women’s liberation on the agenda of their movements stymied by men’s indifference or resistance and established their own organizations (Evans 1979; Thompson 2002; Roth 2004). White feminist radicals might have given sexism more weight than racism, but most women of color resisted the claim that one or the other had to take first place (Ladner 1971; Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982).

In the 1970s and 1980s, contestation over sexuality grew. Lesbians challenged the heteronormative assumptions of straight women, creating new opportunities for alliances and conflicts around issues of male power in and over women’s sexuality (such as prostitution, pornography, rape, and harassment) (Dworkin 1987; MacKinnon 1993). The underlying social networks among lesbians often made these communities the backbone of feminist autonomous organizing

(Rupp and Taylor 1993; Enke 2007) but made autonomous groups more vulnerable to stereotyping. The more clearly autonomous the women's organization, the more it was "suspected" of being by and for lesbians only (Echols 1989; Rupp and Taylor 1993). In contexts where same-sex relationships are strongly and violently repressed (e.g., the American South and many African countries), this association of feminism with lesbianism feeds antifeminist movements. But even in more tolerant contexts, stigmatizing feminism as lesbian or "man-hating" makes it difficult to use "the f-word" (Rowe-Finkbeiner 2004, 6).

In the movement organizing in the late 1960s and 1970s in the United States, with its tensions regarding race, class, sex, and sexuality, theorizing these intersectional concerns emerged as significant, first in the writings and actions of African American women (e.g., Beal 1970; Combahee River Collective 1981) and then further elaborated by other feminist women of color (such as Patricia Hill Collins, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, and Gloria Anzaldúa). Intersectionality, the term coined by African American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw (1988), means that race, class, sexual orientation, nationality, and gender are not discrete markers of difference but rather intersecting social structures of inequality experienced by individuals in specific social locations (McCall 2005; Hancock 2007).

The concept of intersectionality has traveled widely and become vernacularized, becoming an explicit norm for feminist organizers in the United States, Latin America, Africa, the Balkans and other ethnically divided contexts (Yuval-Davis 2006). In Latin America, intersectionality became important after confrontations over differences at the regional feminist *encuentros* in the 1980s, when feminists across the region sought to frame a common agenda (Alvarez et al. 2002; Sternbach et al. 1992). Emphasizing commonalities across differences was more important for feminist organizers who sought to mediate violent conflicts (Tripp 2000; Bagic 2006). However, U.S. and European feminists' attempted solidarity across religious and national lines has sometimes exacerbated controversy in women's rights struggles in other countries (Narayan 1997; Tripp 2006).

In sum, feminist organizing in the 1960s and 1970s, unlike its stereotype, was not only white and middle class and emerged other places besides the West. Tensions due to race and class differences were neither trivial nor overlooked. Intersectional feminist organizing came to mean several things. First, it made the divergent positions and interests among women *visible* rather than advancing an essentializing view of women. Second, it implied *choosing priorities* politically with an eye toward inclusive solidarity, seeking common ground against the background of acknowledged differences. Third, it assumed *organizational variability* in strategies and priorities, since women's goals vary across structural locations and organizational strategies differ in their effects. Rather than identifying universal strategic interests theoretically and representing them through a single movement (Molyneux 1985), feminist intersectionality theories affirm local eclecticism as their method (Jakobsen 1998; Twine and Blee 2001; Wiegman 2008). The actual diversity of feminist practices reflects this.

Political Opportunity Structures

Autonomous strategies vary in appeal and effectiveness depending on the *political opportunity structure* (Della Porta and Diani 1999; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). Political opportunity changes as various political projects succeed or fail at levels from the global (like the cold war or globalization) to the regional (democratization in Eastern Europe and Latin America), national (state–party relations, depth of democratic institutions), and local (distributions of income, media control).

The United Nations (UN) offered a global opportunity structure that responded to feminists and spurred transnational feminist organizing.² After declaring 1975–1985 the decade for women, the UN sponsored four global conferences on women (in Mexico City, Copenhagen, Nairobi, and Beijing). Under UN auspices, the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development and the Vienna Conference on Human Rights also increased global feminist opportunities. All these conferences served as an inspiration for national and regional organizing, fostered more transnational networking (Cummings, Dam, and Valk 1999; Zinsser 2002; Friedman 2003), and gave feminists the opportunity to frame women’s rights and empowerment as national and transnational priorities. Feminist organizers successfully placed women’s right to be free of violence on the international human rights agenda, reproductive rights on the international population agenda, and women’s education and poverty on the global development agenda (Petchesky 1995; Bunch 2001; Snyder 2006). These gains provided a lever to push national governments to adopt policies to realize such goals.

The conferences also served as forums where divisions based on race and class, in and between the Global North and the Global South, resurfaced. At the first UN conference in Mexico City in 1975, divisions reflected economic hegemony by the North over the South; in Copenhagen in 1980, Zionism and apartheid were acrimoniously debated (Winslow 1995; Zinsser 2002). By the 1985 Nairobi meeting a constructive global dialogue began, partly because Southern feminists had now created their own transnational feminist organizations (Snyder 2006). The Beijing Conference in 1995 marked a watershed, with strong feminist consensus in creating a Platform for Action endorsed by most participating governments (Helly 1996; Snyder 2006). Follow-up conferences since Beijing have been smaller and weaker, in part because the United States is pushing against, rather than for, implementation and in part due to backlash from the right-wing factions of Catholicism and Islam.

Political opportunities for regional feminist organizing also vary over time. Some feminist groups emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as part of anti-colonial or revolutionary struggles; others hit their peak only in the 1980s and 1990s as part of democratization movements. The variation suggests both global and regional dynamics at work (Runyan and Peterson 2000; Bose and Kim 2009); historical time also matters. Groups coming later in

countries as diverse as South Korea, Poland, and Argentina built on theories developed elsewhere and drew resources from transnational feminist advocacy networks (Moghadam 2005; Rai 2008). The legitimacy created by the UN conferences and nearly every country's endorsement of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) provided transnational leverage for later-developing feminist movements (Schöpp-Schilling and Flinterman 2007).

In Africa, nationalist movements, democratic movements, and violent conflicts had mixed effects on feminist organizing. In Zimbabwe, women took up arms for liberation, some thinking this was the beginning of a struggle for women's equality (Geisler 1995). Their efforts initially failed but later found support in democratization movements (Ranchod-Nillson 2006). In South Africa, feminist organizers used the transition from apartheid to organize autonomously across racial lines, take on roles in government, and construct a women's policy machinery responsive to rural black women's needs (Seidman 1993, 1999; Hassim 2006). In Ghana, women successfully drew on pre-colonial women's institutions to challenge nondemocratic governments (Fallon 2008). In Uganda, the end of conflict was the critical door opening the way for cross-ethnic feminist organizing in the 1990s and 2000s (Tripp 1999). Feminism was once a term African women rejected as a Western import, but in recent years ever more women's organizations have embraced it (Tripp et al. 2009, 14).

Central American women became feminist activists through their involvement with revolutionary movements in the 1970s and 1980s. In Nicaragua and El Salvador, feminist consciousness grew when women revolutionaries saw gender issues being marginalized. In the immediate postrevolutionary periods in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and to a lesser extent Guatemala, feminist movements flourished, as women took the organizing skills they learned as revolutionaries and applied them to feminist organizing (Hipsher 2001; Luciak 2001; Kampwirth 2004; Shayne 2004). The later revolutionary movement in Chiapas, Mexico, in the 1990s learned from them and explicitly included feminism in its platform and feminists on its revolutionary team (Kampwirth 2002). In the long run, the outcomes for feminists were mixed: in Nicaragua, for example, while the revolutionary government embraced women's issues in the 1980s, the state subsequently turned away from women and toward the Catholic Church (Kampwirth 2008; Heumann 2010).

Across South America in the 1980s, transitions from military dictatorships to democracy provided a favorable political opportunity structure for feminist organizing. Feminists joined human rights activists and poor women's survival-oriented groups to confront dictatorships. Sometimes, these alliances created the tipping point for a democratic transition, as in Brazil and Chile (Alvarez 1990; Jaquette 1994; Baldez 2002). In many countries, feminist organizers succeeded in getting the advancement of women on the democratic agenda through creating women's ministries and reforming family law (Htun 2003; Franceschet 2005; Blofield 2006; Haas 2010).

As in South America, democratization in South Korea served as an opportunity for greater feminist organizing. Women activists in the prodemocracy movement brought an explicitly feminist agenda to it, opposing the sexual violence of the regime and supporting the rights of women workers (Nam 2000; Moon 2002). In India, the suspension of democratic rights in the “state of emergency” of the 1970s mobilized feminists as part of the prodemocracy resistance; when martial law ended in 1977, these groups turned their attention to other abuses, such as judicial insensitivity to rape and domestic violence (Subramaniam 2006). Ray (1999) highlights how opportunities for Indian feminists varied by the politics of their state government; where a single party dominated, women’s organizing was constrained by its priorities, but when parties contended, feminists raised more diverse issues.

Socialism offers complex political opportunities for feminist organizing, sometimes providing a radicalizing revolutionary experience, sometimes a smothering hegemony. In Eastern Europe, the control of communist governments over civil society and claims that communism had solved the “woman question” undermined women’s organizing efforts in the 1990s (Einhorn 1993; Funk and Mueller 1993; Jaquette and Wolchik 1998; Waylen 2007). Postsocialist Eastern European states emphasized a politics of reproduction, often to women’s disadvantage (Gal and Kligman 2000). More recently, their gradual accession to membership in the European Union (EU) has offered these feminists opportunities to use the EU’s declared commitment to gender equality to pressure local governments, playing a policy ping-pong across levels (Zippel 2004, 59; Roth 2008). The story is similar in China, where the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1994 provided opportunity for Chinese feminists to legitimize their own organizing (Liu 2006; Zheng and Zhang 2010).

In sum, particular opportunity structures at the global, regional, national, and local levels shape feminist organizing. Across all continents, the power of women’s grassroots organizations was joined to nongender-specific movements toward democracy or political liberalization, often with stunning effect and sometimes in tension with socialist orthodoxy.

CHANGING CHALLENGES

The present moment is rife with contradictions for feminist organizers. Vibrant value-based networks at global and regional levels have characterized feminist organizing for over a century, and reflexivity about the challenges of intersectionality has increased inclusive solidarity in many feminist organizational contexts. Feminists have arguably been the pioneers in organizing transnational advocacy networks and using the power of global norms to shift local practices of oppression (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Berkovitch 1999;

True and Mintrom 2001; Moghadam 2005; Towns 2010). Still, debates continue about feminist organizing strategies and their relative success or failure in improving women's lives.

Strategic Decisions: Inside Out or Outside In?

Feminist organizing is always happening from the outside in (by autonomous groups) and from the inside out (as embedded feminists work within organizations to activate them on women's behalf). Yet cooperation has been controversial, since "standing outside and throwing stones" seems to be a more radical position than "moving inside and occupying space" (Martin 2005, 102–104). In Australia in the 1980s, feminists purposely infiltrated the state to change policy from within—and their "femocrat" strategy was echoed by feminist activists elsewhere (Eisenstein 1996).

Embedded feminist organizing reflects the institutional structures in which it occurs; for example, in the United States, Catholic feminists became radically antihierarchical due to their powerlessness within this structure, while military feminists narrowed their goals and became more identified with their hierarchy as antidiscrimination laws gave them leverage on it (Katzenstein 1999). In the 1990s, Latin American feminists were bitterly divided between those seeking to pursue change as outsiders and those willing to collaborate with or even to work within the state; the latter were viewed by the former as "selling out" (Sternbach et al. 1992; Vargas 1992; Franceschet 2005). Differences in resources and access help explain which groups choose embedded or autonomous strategies, the ones most often dubbed "radical."

Working with or within the state encourages an organizational style that is more formalized and relies on expertise, not numbers, a style often criticized as "NGOization" (Lang 1997; Alvarez 1999). NGOization can be driven by donors; financial contributions to feminist causes bring a need for fiscal accountability (Bagic 2006; Thayer 2010). Fiscal austerity commonly produced more NGOs, too, as states used feminist organizations to do some of their work in poor communities. Institutional isomorphism—groups copying each other to have structures and activities that seem appropriate—is also likely a factor (Clemens and Cook 1999). Finally, the UN conferences and parallel NGO forums spurred NGOization by offering more access to formally organized groups (Markovitz and Tice 2002; Alvarez 2009).

NGOs typically participate in "transnational advocacy networks" (Keck and Sikkink 1998), mixes of individuals and groups with shared values, high levels of expertise, and direct engagement with policy makers, connected across national boundaries. Organizing such networks facilitates feminist influence on government policy. In the early 1990s, this was true in cases as diverse as European Union development of sexual harassment policies (Zippel 2006), Canadian asylum policy for battered women (Alfredson

2008), and South Korean revisions in family law (Maddison and Jung 2008). NGOs serve as sites for developing feminist knowledge (Zippel 2006; Alvarez 2009), for building support for feminist positions (Markovitz and Tice 2002; Alvarez 2009), and for facilitating subsequent mobilizations (Ferree and Mueller 2004).

However, critics of NGOization point to the tendency of such groups to prefer the contributions of highly educated women (who can offer expertise) to grassroots protest and community engagement (Lang 1997; Naples 1998; Alvarez 1999; Hemment 2007). Moreover, professionalization fosters hierarchy among women's organizations, since those judged more expert receive more financial support (Ewig 1999; Murdock 2008; Thayer 2010). Feminists critical of NGOization stress the contributions grassroots groups make to building a culture of empowerment, habits of protest, and counterhegemonic identity as a radical activist (Ryan 1992; Hercus 2005; Dufour, Masson, and Caouette 2010). They value the emotional ties created through protest activities (Staggenborg and Taylor 2005). Negative and positive assessments of NGOization reflect context: Chinese feminists embraced the UN push toward NGO development as creating opportunities to organize, while Indian feminists saw the same process as threatening their grassroots organizations and diluting their radical claims (Liu 2006).

In addition to feminist NGOs, the 1990s witnessed the flourishing of "state feminism": women's policy machineries inside the state, including women's caucuses in legislative and executive offices (McBride and Mazur 2010). Time and again, across national contexts, the "jaw" strategy of combining feminist efforts within government with an autonomous base outside it has proved the most effective (Lycklama à Nijeholt, Sweibel, and Vargas 1998; Woodward 2004; Ewig 2006). Shirin Rai (2008, 74) describes this position as being "in and against the state."

In sum, feminist organizations have moved toward professionalization, but not without controversy. Despite organizers' success in creating advocacy networks and having influence on and through state policies, opinion remains divided on the extent of substantive feminist gains. Some analysts see insider feminism as winning a feminist struggle for women's access to state power that began in suffrage campaigns (Walby 2011); others view the consolidation of feminist politics in institutions as potentially coopting feminist objectives (Cornwall and Molyneux 2008).

Generational Conflict?

In the 1990s and 2000s, younger feminists claimed to do third-wave feminist politics (Walker 2006), contrasting themselves and their issues with those of earlier generations. The third-wave argument appears mostly in Western Europe and the United States, where the so-called second wave crested earlier;

in many parts of the world, surges of feminist organizing began only in the 1980s or 1990s, and generational succession is moot (Graff 2004). This generation, born between 1961 and 1981 or about thirty years after the blossoming of these countries' autonomous feminist movements, encountered feminism differently. They may have had feminist mothers; feminist analyses had considerable cultural legitimacy; organized antifeminism was growing; and a pervasive consumer culture proclaimed feminism had succeeded, died, and been replaced by commodities symbolizing freedom (Walker 1995; Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Henry 2004; Walby 2011).

Relationships between younger and older U.S. feminists are complicated by a media culture that presents earlier feminists as dowdy, asexual, insufficiently radical, and exclusively white, stereotypes from which younger feminists would like to distance themselves (Henry 2004; Scanlon 2009, 127; Showden 2009, 180). Weigman (2008) also identifies an *idiom of failure* used to distinguish the present righteous radicalism from the limited and luckless feminism of the past. Yet many younger feminists in advanced industrial societies do recognize that their foremothers made controversial, transformative demands that became the common sense of their lives and are aware that gender equality has not actually been realized (Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Henry 2004; Heywood 2006).

While claims of postfeminism gained currency in the United States in the 1990s, these were part of the mobilization against feminism, not a part of it. Postfeminists stress that women should assert themselves individually (rather than turn to collective action) and should renounce overblown claims to victimhood (Schreiber 2008; Showden 2009). Their stance relates to the family values agenda, which accepts what conservatives call *equity feminism* (access on men's terms) and resists any fundamental rethinking of gender (Buss and Herman 2003).

Young feminists and nonfeminists alike appreciate *grrrl power*, their ability to exercise greater sexual self-assertion than their mothers' generation could, but feminists place more value on collective action, intersectional justice, and an inclusive vision of sexuality, one that embraces queer sexuality's many forms (Snyder 2008; Scanlon 2009; Showden 2009). Some warn that young feminists' orientation to consumer culture may obscure their own imbrications with global inequalities and lead to a reprise of Global North–South misunderstandings (Woodhull 2004).

Dangers of Co-optation?

Today feminist organizers are concerned about varieties of co-optation: by neoliberalism; by neoeugenic concerns about declining birth rates in Western Europe and population growth in emerging economies; by militarized conflicts between advanced industrial nations and their Islamic (rather than

communist) “others.” Feminist organizing successes and failures sometimes do reflect less on their strategic choices than on how their demands resonate with larger forces that they do not control. Certainly neoliberalism is a major force restructuring global relations today, as colonialism once was. Some feminists even attribute the gains of neoliberalism in part to feminist organizing, however unwittingly (Bumiller 2008; Eisenstein 2009). Nancy Fraser (2009) writes that feminism’s critique of the family wage opened doors to low-wage employment of women globally, because neoliberal capitalism used this feminist rhetoric to justify access to the poorest paid and most precarious jobs. Similarly, in Bolivia, women’s activists aligned with its recent Left government look askance at the primarily middle-class feminists whose NGOs flourished with the outsourcing of social service work to them under neoliberal governments of the 1990s and early 2000s (Monasterios 2007). Other feminists warn that abandoning rights rhetoric will again sideline women and enable a socialist politics unwilling to take seriously issues of sexuality, reproductive rights, or violence against women (Wiegman 2008; Boxer 2010; Walby 2011).

The instrumentalization of feminist rhetoric for state purposes is also not new and has been widely critiqued by Russian, Chinese, and Eastern European feminists. They found their communist governments cynically wrapped themselves in feminist rhetoric without necessarily advancing feminist projects (Funk and Mueller 1993; Sperling 1999; Liu 2006). Neoeugenic concerns seem to be the most recent iteration. In the 1990s, the Fujimori government of Peru “hijacked” global feminist discourse of reproductive rights for Malthusian ends (Ewig 2006). In the 2000s the EU paid attention to bringing men into childcare and women into paid employment as part of a welfare state agenda defined not as women’s emancipation but as “human capital development” (Jenson 2008).

Feminist organizers today debate how much success feminism has really had. Do the benefits of state adoption of feminist rhetoric outweigh the costs of instrumentalizing feminist demands? Sometimes feminist anger over state misappropriation of their claims dominates, for example, condemning how concern for women’s freedom was used as a ploy to gain support for U.S. military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2002; Cloud 2004; Sjoberg 2006). Feminists are sincerely divided about whether the state is acting in women’s best interests by supporting microenterprises (Keating, Rasmussen, and Rishi 2010), banning Islamic head covering for women in schools (whether in Turkey or in France) (Ertürk 2006), or legalizing prostitution (Outshoorn 2004; Agustin 2007). Others are cynical about the state’s reasons but still see a policy as good for women, as with the German restructuring of child care leaves to make them shorter, better paid, and partially shared with fathers (von Wahl 2008). As feminist discourse has become more acceptable, it has become crucial to distinguish this rhetoric from the actual effects on society that are being legitimated by using it.

CONCLUSION: AGAINST FEMINIST DECLINE

After this survey of global feminist organizing it may seem odd to think that feminism may be past its peak, in abeyance, or finally over. The frequent observation that feminism is in decline does capture the loss of centrality of autonomous women's movements for feminist organizing. Paradoxically, the increasing legitimacy of feminism makes autonomous women's movements not feminists' preferred way to direct political attention to gender issues. Confusing autonomous women's movements—just one strategy—with all feminist organizing obscures the continuing vitality of feminism.

First, feminist organizers work within a wide variety of movements for social justice, as they have always done. Embedded organizers may not be counted when the vitality of feminist activism is assessed, but the opportunity structure increasingly encourages embedded over autonomous feminist organizing. Economic crises brought on by neoliberal globalization, democratic openings in political systems, and changing willingness among male activists to acknowledge gender issues all draw contemporary feminist organizers to work within multi-issue groups (Jakobsen 1998; Naples 1998; Thayer 2010). For example, in the 1980s, the devastation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic increased solidarity between lesbians and gay men, which not only contributed to the rise of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) and queer movement (Bernstein 1997) but also made LGBT, intersex, queer, and transgender organizing much more significant for U.S. feminists today than it was in the 1970s (Barclay, Bernstein, and Marshal 2009; Gould 2009). Multi-issue movements critical of globalization, such as the World Social Forum, also tap feminist energies, but when these campaigns fail to prioritize gender issues feminists may return from embedded to autonomous strategies (Marchand 2003; Desai 2009).

Second, the shift toward a higher proportion of insider to outsider strategies produces fewer feminist rallies on the streets and more feminist “dinner parties” (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 15), more feminists in parliaments, and more feminists doing the work of the movement for pay in professional jobs—in academia, government, and business. Third, the very pervasiveness of feminism sometimes makes it less noticeable. From women's ministries to the girl power rhetoric in marketing consumer goods, feminism is active, but “like fluoride” in the water “we scarcely notice that we have it” (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 17).

Finally, feminist organizing is often hidden in plain sight. Across all regions, feminism remains a contested, often stigmatized, term, so feminist organizing is paradoxically a global force that rarely names itself as such. Around the world, transnational organizations focused on feminist issues are less likely to use the word *feminist* than to describe their concerns as *women's rights*, *gender policy*, or *social justice* (Ferree and Pudrovska 2004; Walby 2011).

In sum, feminist organizing responds to both the inherent intersectionality among race, class, gender, and sexualities and the priorities of its social context. Feminist organizing strategies shift between autonomy and embeddedness, emphasizing autonomy when gender concerns are ignored or trivialized by other movements and embeddedness when their participation is welcomed. Inclusive solidarity (seeking common ground across difference) represents a political choice, but variation in the extent to which feminist organizers have sought exclusive solidarity (likeness as a basis for common efforts) or pursued autonomous women's movement organizing as strategies should not be confused with feminist vitality.

Placing the heyday of feminism in the 1970s is a dangerous myth. It ignores change, limits feminism to only some places in the globe, and celebrates a time when there were so few feminists (and so much ridicule) that nearly all were driven to the streets. Feminist organizing today is more global, more vital, and more transformative. It builds on what has been accomplished but also stimulates important debates over strategies, allies, and effectiveness. It varies in timing and emphasis by region and appreciates the plurality of local feminist paths. It rests on the commitment of many more individual feminists and organizational resources than feminists of the 1920s or 1970s could have imagined. Feminist organizing continues; its heyday may yet come but certainly has not yet passed.

NOTES

1. On women's movements, see the chapters by Beckwith, Joachim, and Kretschmer and Meyer in this volume.
2. For more on global-local interactions, see the chapter by Joachim in this volume.

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