

Transnational Feminist Networks and Contemporary Crises

Written by Valentine M. Moghadam

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VALENTINE M. MOGHADAM, APR 6 2021

To assert that our contemporary world is crisis-ridden is to state the obvious. Climate change, economic crises, conflicts and wars, the persistence of violence against women, gross income inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic – these are but the most obvious crises that have befallen the world's people in just the past four decades. If most of these crises have been caused by states and ruling elites, our global institutions seem unable to do more than decry them and appeal for more international cooperation – in part because those multilateral institutions rely on the funding and goodwill of member-states and especially the richest and most powerful ones.

Social movements, civil society organizations (CSOs), and advocacy groups, especially those organized at the transnational level, have fewer restraints on their ability to analyze the factors and forces behind crises, identify the principal perpetrators, and call for deep and abiding change. Keck and Sikkink (1998) wrote that transnational advocacy networks (TANs) influence state and international politics by framing debates and getting issues on the agenda; encouraging discursive commitments from states and other policy actors; causing procedural change at the international and domestic level; affecting policy; and influencing behavior changes in target actors. Those target actors could be states, particular policies, or international organizations. Social movements – defined as an excluded collectivity in sustained interaction with economic and political elites seeking social change (Tarrow 2011) – include varied types of organizations and networks. In my work, I highlight the role and influence of transnational feminist networks (TFNs). Situated within the field of global feminist social-movement activism, TFNs are groups of women's rights advocates from three or more countries who mobilize and coalesce around a common set of grievances and goals (Moghadam 1996, 2005, 2013). In this contribution, I map out the main features of TFNs and their approaches to various global crises. I survey TFN strategies and achievements to date amidst the formidable structural and institutional constraints that they face but continue to challenge.

Origins, Grievances, and Mobilization Strategies

TFNs have a long history, including a longstanding preoccupation with confronting interstate competition, conflicts, and wars. At the turn of the 20th century, the International Council of Women (ICW), which had been formed in 1888, established an International Standing Committee on Peace and International Arbitration; other standing committees soon emerged on issues from suffrage to health. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) came about in the wake of the devastating Great War and after a 1915 meeting of over 1100 women at The Hague seeking to develop a vision of peace. Much of WILPF's language emphasized the importance of economic, social, and physical security in guarding against future wars (McCarthy et al 2015). Both the ICW and WILPF engaged with the League of Nations and promoted peace, equality of men and women, and women's involvement across all domains. Socialist and labor activists developed their own networks across borders, promoting social justice for working women within and outside the International Labour Organization. Despite their best efforts, a second world war ensued. Its end saw the creation of the United Nations, along with specialized agencies, programs, and funds, and entities such as the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), aligned with the socialist/communist bloc, proposed to designate 1975 as International Women's Year. The proposal passed the CSW and was adopted as a resolution by the UN General Assembly. The first international conference on women took place in Mexico City in 1975, and it was followed by

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three additional world conferences on women: in Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985, and Beijing in 1995. The legacy of first- and second-wave feminism echoed throughout these conferences and their outcome documents.

The late 20th century saw an expanded feminist social movement field with TFNs mobilizing around structural adjustment policies (SAPs), religious fundamentalisms, and civil conflicts. The debt crisis of the 1970s had led the US Treasury, the World Bank, and the IMF to encourage developing countries to shift from state-led economic development to privatization of enterprises and liberalization of trade, finance, and labor markets. SAPs paved the way for the adoption and expansion of the neoliberal capitalist model, which was globalized after the collapse of the socialist/communist bloc in 1991. As early as the 1980s, however, feminist scholars and activists had raised the alarm about the adverse impact of SAPs on women, workers, and the poor in developing countries, and on the ensuing intensification of women's productive and reproductive labor. That period saw the emergence of TFNs such as DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era), WIDE (Women in Development Europe), and WEDO (The Women's Environment and Development Organization). Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) emerged to contest rising religious fundamentalisms, while several new feminist networks coalesced around the growing civil and ethnic-based conflicts of the post-Cold War era. With the outbreak of war in the former Yugoslavia, Serbian feminists adopted the narrative and tactics of Women in Black, an Israeli women's group formed in 1988 opposed to the occupation of the Palestinian West Bank. Women in Black formed in other countries as well, exemplifying feminist movement diffusion as well as longstanding concerns over militarism, violence, and war.

Whether the mobilizing concern was economic justice, religious fundamentalisms, or conflicts and war (Moghadam 2013: 146-161), transnational feminist activism aimed to forge a collective identity among women and to improve the condition of women (Sperling, Ferree, and Risman 2001: 1157). They did so in part by engaging critically with policy and legal issues and with states, international organizations, and institutions of global governance (Moghadam 2005). In addition to critiquing the policies of several institutions of global governance, TFN members or supporters often worked with, and at times within, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) to influence the policy agenda. In the 1990s and into the new century, the UN agency UNIFEM was a reliable partner to TFNs, consulting them and commissioning papers for its own operational activities in various countries. Later, the new consolidated UN agency, UN Women (established 2010), continued the tradition of consulting TFN members and commissioning papers from them for its flagship or periodic reports.

Regional TFNs included the Latin American *Encuentros*, which first met in 1981; North Africa's *Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité* (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia); Sub-Saharan Africa's *Femmes Afrique Solidarité*; Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development; and the European Women's Lobby. Nationally-based activists participate in regional or transnational networks, but the TFNs themselves are broadly affiliated groups that range from highly professionalized, with staff and offices, to more horizontal and fluid networks without such resources. For example, the Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace (WLP) has a secretariat in Bethesda, Maryland, USA, and consists of 20 nationally-based women's groups across world-regions, with most in Muslim-majority countries. It convenes annual partner meetings and holds seminars and webinars as well as workshops in partner countries, where it conducts bottom-up education and campaigns for gender equality. DAWN and WLUML have alternated their 'headquarters' across affiliates' locations, but WLUML has eschewed the concerted lobbying and attendance at intergovernmental meetings that other TFNs engaged in, focusing instead on cross-border solidarity and awareness-raising about patriarchal religious fundamentalisms and state complicity. Organizational varieties notwithstanding, all TFNs share at least two features: actively participating in the transnational public sphere (and thereby helping to sustain it) and creating and maintaining a collective identity as networkers for women's equality, human rights, and empowerment.

In the new century, as dissatisfaction with globalization grew, new grievances arose, as well as opportunities for organizing and mobilizing. Anti-globalization sentiments took shape in TFNs and within women's groups attending the World Social Forum (WSF) – that global annual gathering of progressive groups, first launched in 2001 in Brazil – and its regional forums. Eschle and Maignashca (2010) identify five related concerns and goals of anti-globalization feminism: economic inequalities; exclusion of women from decision-making and political representation; ecological degradation; the control of women's bodies; and violence and militarism. With respect to the latter, the 2003 US/UK invasion and occupation of Iraq generated feminist anti-war activism by longstanding women's peace groups such as

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WILPF, and new ones. Code Pink: Women for Peace, was formed to oppose the war and to call for a shift from militarism to diplomacy, international cooperation, peace, and more social spending at home.

New Challenges and Constraints

The US/UK war on Iraq, the 2008 financial crisis and Great Recession, the Arab Spring and its meltdown, and a weakened UN – all would have implications for transnational feminist partnerships, financing, and strategies. The collapse of the socialist/communist bloc ended funding for the WIDF, which previously had been active throughout Central and Eastern Europe, as well as within the UN's NGO circles (see de Haan 2010). A study by the Association for Women's Rights in Development found that post-2008 budget cuts from donors compelled staff and program downsizing at many women's rights organizations. At the same time, the persistent problem of violence against women, including workplace sexual harassment, continued to preoccupy women across the globe, leading to the proliferation of #MeToo campaigns, most of them taking virtual forms. International women's strikes have diffused globally since 2016, when they first took place in 2016 in Poland over a proposed law to ban abortion and in Argentina following the murder of a pregnant teenage girl. The #NiUnaMenos strikes in other Latin American countries followed to protest continued violence against women. To commemorate International Women's Day (March 8) in 2018, Spain's feminist movement called for a 24-hour women's strike to draw attention to women's roles in paid and unpaid labor and the persistent problem of violence. Since then, the International Women's Strike has taken place in over 50 countries .

In 2020, TFNs confronted the COVID-19 pandemic with statements analyzing its root causes, such as social and gender inequalities and misguided state policies and priorities. TFNs issued joint statements, actions, research plans, and proposals aimed at states and multilateral organizations. They pointed out the disproportionate effects of lockdowns on women and girls, in terms of their physical security, foregone schooling, loss of jobs and income, and intensified care work at home. Coordinated by the Center for Women's Global Leadership, the Feminist Alliance for Rights – itself an international umbrella group – issued a 'Call for a Feminist COVID-19 Policy' around such issues as food security, healthcare, education, social inequality, water and sanitation, economic inequality, and violence against women.

Although the pandemic reduced public displays of transnational feminist activism, it did not prevent new initiatives to contest neoliberal and right-wing governmental controls over women's bodies, labor, and reproductive rights. The Turkish government's plan to repeal the 2012 Istanbul Convention – the outcome document of a Council of Europe meeting to prevent and combat all forms of violence against women – led 300 women's and LGBT rights group to announce the establishment, on 1 August 2020, of the Women's Platform for Equality. In December 2020, the participants issued *The 2020 Declaration on Women's Rights*, which was endorsed by the European Women's Lobby. The Declaration emphasizes collaboration among women's groups and 'effective rights-based solutions to collective problems that have reached the level of global crises (e.g., climate change, militarism, mass displacement, neoliberalism, economic inequalities, and the pandemic) that can only be solved through multilateral efforts and initiatives' (Arat 2020). The Platform's efforts could not, however, prevent the Erdogan government withdrawal from the convention in March 2021.

The persistence of militarism, conflict, and war is met with continued transnational feminist activism. In March 2021, some 182 women's organizations under the Women's Peace Network umbrella issued a letter to the UN Security Council, condemning the February military coup in Myanmar and subsequent assaults against civilian protesters (Women's Peace Network 2021). Three years earlier, WILPF had issued a call for a 'feminist Security Council' (WILPF 2018). In May 2020, Women Cross DMZ, which focuses on the North Korea-South Korea divide, joined Code Pink and others to demand a 'feminist foreign policy' to confront the pandemic through a global ceasefire, an end to 'US militarism at home and abroad', and redefining national security. Many TFNs noted that collective action and global solidarity were key to 'establishing infrastructure for an equitable post-pandemic future' and called for debt cancellation so that countries could create more effective policies for gender equality and environmental protection (Code Pink 2020; FaDA 2020; WEDO 2020; WILPF 2020). TFNs such as WILPF, Madre, Code Pink, and WLP, among others, call on movements and organizations to help shift state priorities from the militarist national security paradigm to a people-centered human security strategy.

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An examination of transnational feminist networks over time reveals differences in core ideologies or political preferences and in organizational forms, but continuity and consistency in overarching goals, strategies, and activities. These include engagement with institutions of global governance, the building of constituencies, critiques of masculinist policies and practices, and proposals for social equality, economic justice, and peace – all prerequisites for women’s empowerment. What follows is a summary of mobilizational strategies, which occur at global, regional, national, and local levels:

- TFNs participate in multilateral arenas and intergovernmental (IGO) meetings. They observe and address UN departments such as ECOSOC and bodies such as CSW, and they consult for UN agencies, including UN Women and the UN regional commissions. By taking part in IGO meetings and preparing background papers, briefing papers, and reports, TFNs and women’s NGOs help set agendas and increase expertise on issues. By lobbying delegates, they raise awareness and cultivate supporters. For example, the March 2021 statement on Myanmar, mentioned above, urged the UN Security Council to implement an arms embargo on the military-led government. TFN members and founders have worked as consultants or staff members of IGOs, the purpose of which is to raise new issues—gender and trade, women’s human rights, violence against women in war zones, and the need for more precise gender (in) equality measurement tools—and to influence policy.
- TFNs create, activate, or join global networks and coalitions to mobilize pressure outside states; they do so via e-petitions, action alerts, and appeals; acts of civil disobedience; other forms of public protest; and sometimes direct action. For example, after the 2001 founding of the WSF, TFNs became active participants, and some joined the International Council. Across the globe, they have joined local women’s groups in the UN’s annual “16 Days against GBV [gender-based violence]”. In partnership with the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance and Women Cross DMZ, along with a lengthy list of other partners, MADRE issued a new report, ‘A Vision for a Feminist Peace: Building a Movement-Driven Foreign Policy’ (MADRE 2021).
- TFNs act and agitate within states, at both local and national levels, to enhance public awareness and participation, often using innovative digital platforms for training and advocacy and to reach diverse constituencies. WLP’s partnership model exemplifies this strategy, as does Code Pink’s extensive on-line activism and collaborative webinars. Others similarly work on-line and off-line with labor, peace, human rights, and progressive religious groups on social policy and humanitarian, development, and militarization issues. They link with and support partners, take part in coalitions, and provoke or join in public protests. In the U.S. state of Massachusetts, for example, Code Pink and local WILPF branches join Massachusetts Peace Action in protesting the locally-based Raytheon Corporation for its role in the continued sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia for the latter’s assault on Yemen.

Conclusions

Working with civil society and social movement partners and with allies in IGOs, transnational feminist activism spans local, national, regional, and global terrains, and has become a fixture of world politics. At the time of this writing (March-April 2021), TFNs were taking part in the 65th meeting of the CSW, albeit largely virtually, holding their own side events around the issue areas mentioned above and more. Mobilization strategies have sought to sustain feminist collective identity, set agendas for policy reform, and contribute to normative cultural change and broader societal transformation. The constraints are formidable – an entrenched capitalist world-economy that has enriched the few and wreaked havoc on the environment, and a hierarchical interstate system that encourages rather than reduces militarism, conflict, and war. The economic, political, health, and environmental crises that emerge from such a world-system may seem interminable, but they will continue to elicit responses from social movements, CSOs, and transnational feminist networks. TFNs such as WLP, WILPF, Madre, and Code Pink, among others, will continue to advocate for ending militarization and prioritizing peace, international cooperation, and human security.

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