

Neoliberalism, feminism and transnationalism

Alison Winch, Kirsten Forkert
and Sally Davison

The essays in this special issue attest to the multiplicities of neoliberal practice across the globe, and to the ways in which aggressive neoliberal marketisation impacts differently across different axes (of class, race, age and gender, amongst others). The focus of this issue is on feminism and gender inequality, but, as the contributors show in their many different ways, it is impossible ever to separate out a specific form of inequality, and to see it as existing independently of other structures of privilege and disadvantage, or to see the experiences of any one group in isolation from the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and exclusion in which they are formed. Our contributors also offer a range of different ways of understanding this variety, and different takes on how to organise. What is not in dispute, however, is that women are organising in new and radical ways in many different contexts and in many different countries.

Ruth Pearson, writing about women's experience of neoliberalism in the UK, draws attention to women's role in 'daily and generational reproduction', and argues that understanding the centrality of this work to the economy is key to any feminist political economy. She also argues that the rollback of social democracy has left most of those on whom this responsibility falls in a vulnerable position. Because it is primarily women who do this work, and because the cuts hit working-class

Editorial

people and people of colour the hardest, it is these groups that bear the brunt of the government's austerity measures (which, as she notes, are political measures, aimed at redistributing income away from the poorest groups and towards the already wealthy). Tamsyn's Dent's review of Tracey Jensen's *Parenting the Crisis* reinforces this point: Jensen argues that working-class parents are demonised and blamed in the media for problems that are caused by the failures of the state. Care work and the reproduction of generations is also central to Sara Motta's analysis of feminist and feminised struggles in Latin America. Here too, neoliberal policies - and their connections with 'patriarchal capitalist-coloniality' - have specific impacts on specific constituencies. Precarity has been exacerbated across the working class, indigenous and black people have been amongst the most severely affected, and poverty has been feminised.

The ways in which neoliberalism intersects with so many other structural inequalities - including colonialism and post-colonialism - is also key to the essays by Yemisi Akinbobola, who interrogates feminism in Nigerian contexts, and Awino Okech and Dinah Musindarwezo, who discuss the pan-African feminist network FEMNET. For these authors, as well as Motta, feminist resistance is often in complex negotiation with the multiple effects of colonialism and globalisation, and this has impacts on the possibilities for transnational feminist solidarities.

Neoliberalism has also offered opportunities for some women, although its gestures towards feminism are usually double-edged. In Latin America, as Motta notes, 'the neoliberal transnational governing elite have embraced a gendering of development which places women's rights at the heart of overcoming poverty and inequality'. However, while this may enhance the prospects of a small group, as she shows, the money that is then allocated becomes a stand-in, a substitute for any real attempt to overcome gendered hierarchies and power relationships. Indeed, the neoliberal development practice of offering micro-finance, or conditional targeted subsidies, works to 'contain the poor racialised woman'.

What Catherine Rottenberg has called 'neoliberal feminism' is a focus of analysis for many contributors. All recognise that it is problematic, but there is not a general consensus in this area. It is clear from any intersectional analysis that gender can be articulated to privilege as well as to poverty, but it is less clear what this means for alliances between women in tackling issues of gender inequality, or whether gender inequality can ever be seen as cutting across other differences - as constituting

Soundings

a potentially common ground. As Alison Phipps points out in her discussion of 'the politics of whiteness', some of the most 'visible activists in the movement against sexual violence are white and privileged women' who can access corporate media platforms and have 'benefited from employment opportunities offered by neoliberalism'. Phipps also outlines a number of ways in which liberal feminist concerns sometimes overlap with those of the right.

Akinbobola has a completely different approach to neoliberal feminism, though she too understands its problematic nature. She argues that in Nigeria, where the government does not support gender equality, and poverty, unemployment and lack of financial opportunity have fostered an 'individualised entrepreneurial mindset', it may be that a form of neoliberal feminism could be better accepted than other African takes on feminism. Because of the need for income, all women who can find paid work take it on, and this means that equality at work and in business has been easier to achieve than equality in the home. This offers the possibility for a Nigerian version of the neoliberal feminist goal of individual empowerment and a good work-life balance - though it would remain dependent on accepting inequality within the family. Akinbobola is, understandably, ambivalent about this prospect, but one of her key points is that we need to be aware that ideas have very different effects in different contexts.

Because feminism is a collective but constantly contested site of struggle, the individualism of neoliberalism is noted by all the authors as a space to interrogate. Each of the authors argues the crucial role of collectivities, solidarities and feminist-driven organisations in the battle to seek freedom or justice or liberation. Motta notes the importance of the mass feminist movement *Ni Una Menos* in Argentina, the Woman's Strike, *The Escuela de Mariposas de Alas Nuevas* (School of Butterflies with New Wings), as well as the many decolonial/Black and Indigenous feminist struggles across Latin America. Okech and Musindarwezo centre the FEMNET network that builds transnational networks to last beyond issue-based campaigning. Pearson writes as a member of the Women's Budget Group in the UK, and Akinbobola as the founder of African Women in the Media. These groups also have wider - and complicated - relationships with other organising forces with whom they need to negotiate, sometimes on the neoliberal colonial terrain. This could be with masculine-dominated left politics, local political struggles, development organisations, international NGOs, financial institutions, western feminisms,

Editorial

nationalisms, as well as intergenerational organising. These complex negotiations, solidarities and conflicts are key to the growth and sustainability of feminist organisations and collectivities. They also provide a rich source of reflection on how to organise in the broader struggles for liberty and equality. As Motta puts it, they offer ‘great gifts that can contribute towards a re-imagining of revolutionary politics’.

#MeToo features in a number of the essays, with many of the authors professing ambivalence towards the movement. Rottenberg recognises some elements of #MeToo as dovetailing with neoliberal feminism, and therefore as sharing in some its weaknesses. She sees neoliberal feminism as ‘a feminism that has been unmoored from key terms, such as equality, justice and emancipation’, and argues that it exhorts women ‘to perceive themselves as human capital’. And, although the movement might recognise the gendered pay gap and gendered violence, the solutions it puts forward are often based on individuals speaking out, as with #MeToo’s emphasis on the ‘Me’. Such solutions ultimately overlook ‘the structural and economic undergirding of these phenomena’ and, in so doing, ‘help make poor and immigrant women, as well as women of colour, even more precarious and invisible than they already are’. Phipps concurs, noting that neoliberal feminists often appear on the same corporate media platforms that offer men accused of harassment a space to defend themselves. Thus ‘the politics of sexual violence can appear to be a conversation between white people about who is in control’.

Despite her ambivalence towards the movement, however, Rottenberg notes that it can also go beyond the “Me” of MeToo’. After all, the ‘Too’ can (and has) produced solidarities and mobilisations. Since so many women do share a common experience of sexual violence, the access to media platforms of more privileged women can act as a mobiliser for more popular forms of feminism.

This common experience of widespread sexual violence, as well as of some of the other issues facing the global north, such the rise of authoritarian and fundamentalist regimes (as also noted by Phipps), stolen elections and the closing of civic space, is noted by Okech and Musindarwezo. They argue that addressing these problems - which have typically been seen as part of ‘Africa’s DNA’ (reflecting a blindness towards colonial legacies) - might now create points of solidarity between feminists in the global north and the global south. The global reach of the effects of neoliberalism could mean that the struggle against them becomes a common cause for feminists fighting for freedom and justice. Okech and Musindarwezo also argue

Soundings

that this provides an opportunity to move the global conversation away from an obsession with capacity-building and financial resources in African contexts, and instead to shift to a discussion that ‘focuses on geo-political feminist solidarity as a site of collaboration and ally-ship’: threats ‘to freedom, justice, bodily autonomy and sexuality integrity are now visible everywhere, and are frequently led by state actors. Freedom and justice have no geographical home’.

Indeed, violence runs through these essays, and this includes epistemological and ontological violence as well as its more well-known forms. It is important here to note the dynamics of power within feminism itself: power is frequently exercised in feminist organising, for example when old-guard feminists police the boundaries of ‘biological’ womanhood and exclude trans people. In a form of argument that has some similarities with earlier moralising debates in relation to sex workers, anti-trans feminists fail to acknowledge the experiences of trans people and the discrimination they face - or the particular challenges of transitioning. They also run the risk of aligning themselves with authoritarian populists and religious fundamentalists who also reject the rights of trans women, but whose goals and politics are antithetical to feminism.

A similar failure to acknowledge other experiences and perspectives also marks international debates on women’s rights, particularly in cases where campaigners of the global north do not listen to women from the global south. Okech and Musindarwezo, wary of the binaries that conventionally structure global conversations in international relations spaces, propose a ‘reflexive transnational feminism’ that ‘foregrounds the contradictions and dangers inherent in feminist processes’. In particular, they are critical of the concept of difference that bases itself on defining an external other, with no sense of the internal contradictions that exist within groups of shared identity, whether this is ‘Africa’ in opposition to the ‘developed world’, African women versus white western women, or African women versus African men. Relating this to FEMNET, they note the crucial importance of maintaining an awareness of how race, class and heteronormative logics work to sustain the power hierarchies that entrench these binary oppositions. They see transnational feminist frameworks as having the potential to disrupt North/South dichotomies.

The call for an ethics of care and of listening periodically punctuates feminist organising and theorising. At the Soundings and The World Transformed event that

Editorial

took place in London in February 2019, Farzana Khan and other panel speakers talked about the importance of trust and care in political organising. Even though the event was not billed as a specifically feminist event, the speakers centred the importance of recognising differences across the axes of class, race, religion, gender, age, region and disability, and noted how exclusionary structures affect forms of collective working as well as political education. In a room of people across ages, it was clear that there was an impulse to work together, intergenerationally and collectively, against the effects of neoliberalism. The questions asked were often about what form of commonality this could take, or which direction to move in, especially when so many activist groups are mobilised around different issues.

The feminisms addressed in this special issue, and the areas of struggle they describe, attest to the energies and potentialities that are currently being mobilised on a transnational scale. At the same time, they reveal how colonialism, capitalism, racism and other forms of potential violence pervade feminist sites. Vigilance about the potential of these structures of oppression to inform feminist dialogue is a key part of our efforts to forge and strengthen transnational feminist solidarities. In her review of Amrit Wilson's *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain*, Jannat Hossain argues for the importance of forging connections. She ends with some words from Angela Davis: 'I think that this is an era where we have to encourage that sense of community particularly at a time when neoliberalism attempts to force people to think of themselves only in individual terms and not in collective terms. It is in collectivities that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism.'

This issue includes two further articles not related to the main theme, though their arguments have many resonances with the themes outlined above. The first of these is a group of three discussion pieces in the series 'Conversations with Stuart Hall', based on talks organised by the Stuart Hall Foundation. Michael Rustin discusses the meaning of modernisation, and how the regressive right have recaptured political ground through associating neoliberal globalisation with progressive social policy. Ash Sarkar argues that the debate on immigration is too often couched in racist terms, and there are too many people who will always regard black and Asian people as immigrants. John Harris reflects on the effects of post-Fordism and disorganised

Soundings

capitalism on the towns he has visited over the last ten years.

In our final article, Liv Sovik writes on how it feels to be living in Brazil in the aftermath of the election of Jair Bolsonaro, as the country enters into unknown territory. Bolsonaro put together a coalition of the traditional far right and business kleptocracy with some of the newer forces of social conservatism in Brazil, including the neo-pentecostal churches. The regime has particularly focused its campaigns of hatred against feminists and gay activists, who it sees as being backed up by a conspiracy of 'cultural marxists' and 'gender ideologists' in the universities. It is also waging war on the favelas and the number of political street executions is rising. The election result reflects the erosion of the old popular majority based around the Workers Party and the traditional civil society groups that sustained it. The left in Brazil now needs to do some serious thinking, and begin to make new alliances. A fragile hope for new forms of popular unity has recently been kindled by mass protests over the killing by right-wing militia men of Rio councillor, feminist, and black and human rights activist Marielle Franco.