

An International Look at the Women's Movement: The Gender Agenda of the Global South

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Berfu Şeker
Researcher

After receiving her undergraduate degree in Cinema and Television from Marmara University, Berfu Şeker completed her master's in Critical and Cultural Studies at Boğaziçi University. She has researched, published, translated and edited works on gender, queer theory, feminist film criticism, academia and activism. She is on the Advisory Board for Queer Dream (Queer Düş) at Sel Publishing. She has been doing advocacy work at Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR) - New Ways since 2016, while continuing research and translation work.

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Begüm İçelliler

We are at a time when the global politics of women's rights, gender and feminism are intersecting at the regional and national level, forming around similar dynamics and practices. Against the gains made by women and LGBTI+ groups towards changing gender politics until the 2000s, we are seeing that new populist trends have been gaining power since 2000s. Today, we are faced with a political framework that imitates the rights-based discourse of women's rights (especially bodily rights), gender equality, sexual orientation and gender identity, makes visible patriarchal populist discourse and arguments using rights advocates' terminology, methodology and areas, and where groups that seek to invade these areas are multiplying.

The rising patriarchal, populist and neoliberal global politics is especially causing rights losses for LGBTI+ individuals and women of the Global South, where democratic institutions are ever eroding and their meaning becoming obscured. Against these losses, women's rights advocates of the Global South are forming transnational networks to make visible their analysis and critique of the roots of gender discrimination and the dynamics of violence.

Global South

The Global South, an unfamiliar term in Turkey, has first been used by international developmental organizations to signify economically disadvantaged states, and create an alternative to the term "Third World". Lately, it has come to mean places and people negatively affected by contemporary capitalist globalization. Accordingly, the Global South represents not so much a geographical location but the externalities of capitalism and those subjugated peoples living within the borders of rich countries.

The term “Global” prevents “South” from being strictly associated with geography. The Global South denotes a political situation rather than a geographical area, which allows it to represent transnational political subjects with similar experiences of subjugation and resistance against contemporary global capitalism.

Those most heavily affected by patriarchal, neoliberal and populist global politics are women and LGBTI+ individuals of the Global South where democratic institutions, never properly institutionalized, are always open to erosion and transformation. Taking as their starting point this transnational political subject, feminists of the Global South, by strengthening their solidarity, criticize international politics that ignore the effects of the aforementioned global political tendencies on different geographies, and fail to reflect the different needs and demands of the Global South.

Against all these political trends, they defend a feminist politics that puts intersectionality at the foreground. They shape their discourse against the narrative of universal womanhood, drawing attention to the subjugation of women based on their differences (class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.) and the intersectionality of all these forms of subjugation. While global populist, neoliberal and patriarchal structures manifest themselves differently in different regions, women and LGBTI+ individuals of the Global South are struggling to show that it is in fact the same mechanisms of domination that lie beneath the violations caused by these structures.

Populism, Neoliberalism and Rights Violations

In recent years, populist anti-gender movements, closely aligned with the Catholic Church, are spreading widely with popular and governmental support. These movements, which previously self-defined as anti-abortion, seem to have found “anti-gender” suitable to express more comprehensively their right-wing populist views against feminism and human rights advocacy struggles. These groups, which have been devising strategies against gains made by international political mechanisms on women’s rights, gender equality, sexuality and reproductive health and rights since the 1990s (1) are striving to block international policy processes on various platforms.

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Claiming that gender is about “essence”, that they do not believe in equality and are responsible for the conservation of rigid gender roles and norms, these movements oppose that gender is a matter of construction. Even when it comes to such undisputable an issue as violence against women, they empty the meaning out of “violence” and turn this and other terms against rights advocates, trying to spread the idea that they are all relative terms. From the perspective that women’s sexuality should be regulated through their reproductivity, they support legal arrangements that prevent women from making decisions about their bodies. As discourse and practices against academic, civil and international legal studies in gender are spreading, they manifest themselves differently in different regions, while causing the eruption of gains made by women in their rights claims.

Efforts against the passing of the most comprehensive, contemporary and binding Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, or Istanbul Convention in Croatia, the Constitutional decision in Bulgaria against the ratification of Istanbul Convention, the Argentinian Parliament’s rejection of the bill to legalize abortion, and statespersons’ statements in Brazil and the Philippines that legitimize all kinds of violence against women are just a few examples of the challenges facing women’s rights today.

On top of the political discourse against rights discourse, as a result of neoliberalism and growth oriented development policies, multiple discrimination is deepening even further. In some countries in Asia and Africa international companies and other states buy or rent large swathes of agricultural land for industrial agricultural production. This results in especially women losing the land that they rely on for their food and livelihood, thus facing the prospect of starvation and deeper poverty. It stands as a great contradiction that even such international political texts as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which tackles sustainability in its social, economic and environmental dimensions, see the private sector as an important partner in securing financial support for sustainability. It is a matter of debate whether this issue erodes the accountability of governments in protecting the rights of people, especially those of women. A significant barrier against gender equality and women's empowerment in the Global South is women losing the land that provides shelter, nutrition and livelihood. Yet, what barriers to gender equality these policies present is understudied, which stands as a great problem area.

Discrimination and exclusionary practices that come about with development models that only seek economic growth, fail to consider the human rights perspective, and ignore environmental and social progress are things which women and LGBTI+ individuals of the Global South are trying to make visible. The erosion of the welfare state and privatization of fundamental services such as health and education are major obstacles to access to rights for women and LGBTI+ individuals of the Global South. For instance, in some countries, while the law does not restrict access, the increasing privatization of health services impedes, even makes impossible women's access to reproductive services. Militarization of states renders democracy more vulnerable, while at the same time war and conflict cause great rights violations, and prevent women's access to fundamental services, including health, shelter and nutrition. As gender-based violence against women is rising in Latin America, it becomes apparent that effective policies against femicide are not being made, and women face great difficulties in accessing their de facto and de jure rights. On the other hand, civil society around the world is being limited, with many organizations, groups and platforms struggling for survival for various reasons.

Global Women's Solidarity

Despite all these obstacles against gender equality, feminists, women's rights advocates and LGBTI+ individuals around the world are devising new strategies in building solidarity. As I mentioned at the outset, the Global South is a definition which points not so much to a geographical location as to a political subject. Being a woman in the Global South, on the other hand, is not to have a homogenous identity. While women's solidarity in the Global South rejects a unitary understanding of feminism or women's identity, Global-ly (both in North and South) it seeks to create solidarity models that get their strength from women's differences. And it does so in the face of rising right-wing populist movements that go hand in hand with neoliberalism.

The strong women's movements of the Global South are struggling, through these networks of solidarity, to make visible those local problems that are not taken into account by Western feminisms in international policy making and international policy documents. To achieve this they are striving to create spaces for dialogue, sharing experiences and debate. In devising new concepts and practices on global women's solidarity, they are asserting feminism as a political alternative to global capitalism. They are bringing to the fore the problems facing refugee, migrant, asylee, displaced, disabled, rural and poor women.

On the other hand, young feminists of the Global South are devising a new political dialogue with different voices that speaks against patriarchal global systems, while thinking about their own organization practices. They emphasize that play, joy and mental self-care are just as important and political as speaking up against systematic violence. They stress the need for inclusive, participatory and democratic processes, and for accountability and transparency within feminist movements. They criticize the power dynamics and hierarchical relationships that the women's movement produces along lines of age, experience, class, etc. and stress that a more inclusive and intersectional feminism may provide an alternative to today's political impasse. By creating a movement that is dedicated to sharing power, building trust and strengthening solidarity, they emphasize the importance of struggle in their relations, networks and politics.

Notes

1. Such as UN International Population and Development Conference, UN 4th World Women Conference and their action plans.



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