

Gender and Race Matter: Global Perspectives on Being a Woman

Introduction

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We know of course there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard.

Arundhati Roy, 2004 Sydney Peace Prize lecture, activist and author of *The God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy reminds us that through listening to the marginalised, valuable wisdom can be gained yet a large percentage of the world's population, women, have been systematically unheard. This makes the task of generating a fair and inclusive (global) society for women much more difficult. Gender inequality persists in most countries and although it appears that we have a long way to go, this collection contributes to a feminist scholarship that highlights a destabilising of established patterns of behaviour and gender relations. Indeed the drive for gender equality and social justice has featured in the work of the United Nations (UN), cited as occupying a central role for legislative change globally. Although discrimination and prejudice experienced by women vary from one country to another, it is the persistence of inequality that is of main concern. The UN has been at the forefront of campaigns and declarations which promote gender equality as a human right by establishing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In 2010 the organisation, UN Women¹ was created by the United Nations General Assembly to monitor gender equality and empowerment of women. Over the last twenty years, many reports² have been published to highlight inequalities and injustice faced by women. The Global Gender Gap Reports since 2006 have measured inequalities by charting each country's performance in four major areas: health, education, economy and politics. Although progress had been made the struggle for equality and

¹ the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

² *The World's Women 2010; Progress on the World's Women 2011-2012: In Pursuit of Justice; Global Gender Gap Reports since 2006.*

empowerment continues, the existence of a political empowerment gap indicates severe lack of rights and opportunities for women.

This book presents different authors' work that demonstrate inequalities experienced by women and their empowerment through protest, cultural forms, activism and use of social media. Highlighting moments of agency is extremely important given recent events that have attracted global attention: the abduction of schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Nigeria in 2014³, the gang rape of a young woman in Delhi in 2012⁴, the treatment of women in public spaces such as Tahrir Square in 2011⁵ and the increasing use of rape as a weapon of war⁶. At the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, held in June 2014, it was highlighted that global attitudes need to be changed. Yet as we know, changing attitudes and practices require raising awareness and proved to be a difficult task. This has been evidenced by the modest achievements of Millennium Development Goal 3 which seeks to promote gender equality and empower women. Although the United Nations has the unenviable task of promoting awareness of women's issues, it has to be commended on, for example, the 'He for She Campaign' launched in 2014.

The campaign for gender equality is a human rights issue that seeks to eradicate discrimination against women and promotes social justice by including men. As a

³ Boko Haram kidnapped 276 schoolgirls from the northern village of Chibok sparking a worldwide campaign #bringbackourgirls. Although some girls managed to escape, the majority are missing or have been returned but are pregnant. This indicates that they have been raped – a stigma not easily dealt with in Nigerian society. Some are described as fighting for the Islamist group Boko Haram.

⁴ On 16 December, 2012, Jyoti Singh was gang raped in Delhi on a private bus by six men. She was transferred to a hospital in Singapore due to the severity of the attack, however she died from her injuries. This incident attracted global media attention and resulted in protests in many Indian cities. Before her identity was revealed, Jyoti Singh was known as *Nirbhaya* which means 'fearless' and she became a symbol for the women's movement in India who have struggled against blaming the victim.

⁵ A beating of a woman in Tahrir Square in Cairo by the military became the symbol for protesters in Egypt in 2011. A video recording showed how she was violently beaten and her clothes ripped off to reveal her torso and blue bra. A soldier is shown to stomp on her bare body. It provoked shock and international anger at the treatment of women in Egypt in public spaces. The Egyptian military was forced to apologise and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces expressed regret to Egyptian women at their transgressions. Egyptian women want to be involved in the construction of the Constitutional Council that determines the future political system.

⁶ Rape is a prohibited weapon or tactic of war under the criteria set by the laws of war. Yet, despite the endemic use of rape as a weapon, no state has ever been held accountable for the use of rape as a prohibited weapon of war (Global Justice Center: Human Rights Through the Rule of Law). Retrieved from <http://www.globaljusticecenter.net/index.php/our-work/geneva-initiative/rape-as-a-weapon-of-war> (Accessed 28.02.2016)

concept, social justice holds a variety of meanings philosophically and politically. It has been associated with concepts such as (in)equality giving it a complexity which is rival only to the complexities of any given society. Equality is embedded in the following principle:

Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others.

(Rawls, 1971: p.3)

The egalitarian conceptualisation of social justice above can also be found in the work of David Miller (2001) who identifies four key principles of social justice: equal citizenship, the social minimum, equality of opportunity and fair distribution. This includes empowerment of women through equal access to education and employment *and* involvement in politics and decision-making. Statistics tell us that women continue to struggle for equal recognition in society from the global to the micro-world of gaining educational credentials and suitable employment. The contributors to this collection demonstrate an understanding of oppression and the initiatives taken to facilitate social change which includes resistance to patriarchal structures and hierarchies of power. However, what is required to overcome discriminatory practices that 'preserve patriarchy at the expense of women's rights' is the involvement of everyone (Raday, 2007, p.70).

This collection uses a feminist analysis which sees women's involvement in activities that are empowering in a range of settings. Empowerment is an important concept to use particularly in the context of women's rights and involvement in decision-making processes, however, it is not the preserve of women in developing countries as the following example illustrates. Persistent inequality and sexism in British politics was played out in 2011 when David Cameron remarked, 'calm down dear', directed at a female MP during prime minister's questions and by the Secretary of State for Education David Willetts' negative assessment of the impact of feminism on male social mobility. It therefore comes as no surprise that there is underrepresentation of women in politics in a number of countries and is of deep concern with reference to policy making. Empowerment is a useful tool of analysis and is often used in

connection with women and the gender gap highlighted above. It involves the contested term 'power' with theoretical debates revolving around its meaning (Lukes (2005 [1974])). I propose that rather than using the 'power over' definition which implies control through overt coercion and subtle psychological processes *and* a perceived loss of power (by men), we should use the generative understanding. This can be used to improve women's position in society and can be thought of as relational and multiple, that is its existence relies on the moments it is exercised within social relationships. This form of empowerment provides women with a capacity for agency and self-definition. There is however a debate around the concept of empowerment because it draws on the different concepts of generative forms of power with some writers understanding it as psychological awareness of a woman's position in society (Takhar, 2013).

A feminist analysis enables us not only to look at power but how agency operates i.e. consciousness of our position in society. Furthermore, the 'power to' (generative) understanding facilitates organised collective demands to transform society and to resist oppressive practices. The importance of feminism is eloquently expressed in the following statement by Judith Butler:

Feminism is about the social transformation of gender relations [...] That it asks how we organize life, how we accord it value, how we safeguard it against violence, how we compel the world, and its institutions, to inhabit new values, means that its philosophical pursuits are in some sense at one with the aim of social transformation.

(Butler, 2004:pp.204–205)

This type of comprehension brings together an understanding that combines theory and action. Equality and rights through a feminist understanding challenges the victim status given to women who are oppressed by patriarchal structures, however, the eradication of structural inequalities associated with race and gender is not an easy task, conveyed by the writers in this collection. We live with risk, alienation, exclusion and conflict yet we strive for social justice that presents itself as a desire for 'conviviality' and a sense of belonging to a community (Gilroy, 2004). Conviviality 'is intimately related to a sense of becoming, and "becoming" occurs

intersubjectively' (Wise & Velayutham, 2014, p.1). All of this occurs in the context of globalisation, individualism, plurality and uncertainty so the answers are not simple or straightforward. Similarly the issues of a community and belonging come through as complex and contradictory. However, what we hear, are the voices of those who could easily be marginalised or excluded from society and how in an increasingly fractured world, strategies are employed at a micro level to facilitate social change. It acknowledges multiplicity of discrimination but locates women at the centre of a dialogue. It presents key interventions in gender and race matters through the inclusion of marginalised groups by giving them a 'voice' rather than silencing them. *Gender and Race Matter*, therefore, contributes to the study of women's agency and how their voices can be heard in the face of powerful discourses and ideology. One of the most powerful ways in which this can happen is through equal access to education. Although unequal access may be thought of as the preserve of developing countries, it is evident in most. This is illustrated by the contributions that explore inequality and marginalisation experienced at the intersection of race and gender in all societies:

All cultures contain elements that disenfranchise women as well as ones that empower them. It is for us to recognize by whose machinations and for whose benefit the former become reified as tradition and the latter exiled to obscurity. As activists we need to salvage those parts of our culture that uplift women as a group.

(Das Dasgupta, 2002, p.10).

For the contributors, gender serves as an analytical framework and covers the experiences of women in different global settings related to education, political activism, corporeal violence, identity, sexuality, and poverty. The use of poetry and literature provides a powerful voice for women against exclusion and recognises their contribution to society. This collection hopes to be innovative in not only relating experiential evidence but also putting forward how women are able to challenge oppression through circumventing rules, roles, obligations and prejudice through a powerful agency.

Part I looks at activism and agency in Egypt and Iran as well as the diasporic experiences of Bangladeshi women in UK higher education institutions. In Egypt,

women have been at the forefront of revolutionary aims and have displayed significant levels of agency. The Egyptian feminist movement has highlighted the struggle for equality in the public sphere, decision-making and constitutional rights in the post-2011 era illustrated in the chapter by Hala Kamal on women's empowerment and feminist activism. Kamal claims that Egyptian women have been involved in the struggle for spaces where their agency can be realised and which have been closely connected to revolutionary moments in national history. The chapter highlights key issues and socio-economic demands raised by women since the early twentieth century. She shows how agency, activism and empowerment amongst women have been promoted through CEDAW and solidarity with the international women's movement. Kamal plays particular attention to the current situation which focuses on constitutional rights and political representation in the wake of the 2011 revolution, and examines its impact on the Egyptian feminist agenda. Due to the global media attention given to the brutal handling of 'the blue bra woman' by the military, there is concern over the extent to which women's bodies have been subjected to physical and sexual violence.

Tara Povey's chapter looks at political activism of women in Iran, focusing on the strategies employed in a neo-liberal context. Through empirical research, she demonstrates how changes engendered by neo-liberal policies by successive governments, rather than religion, are shown to create difficulties and exclude people from mobilising politically. Povey suggests that women are in opposition to a neo-liberal state which poses interesting questions about the characterisation of Iran as an 'Islamic state'. The chapter offers an insight to Iranian women's struggle for liberation and contributes to an understanding of different forms of feminism globally.

Women globally have been shown to struggle with reference to inclusion in higher education institutions and the two chapters that follow are concerned with firstly, the diasporic experience of Bangladeshi women in the UK and secondly, Iranian women's struggles for freedom through progress made in higher education and employment. Shaminder Takhar's chapter addresses Bangladeshi female students' experiences of higher education in the UK through the race/gender trajectory. The chapter argues that statistically minority ethnic women invest heavily in education but they go on to face obstacles in the labour market. However, there is a strong desire

to study which is evident in the increasing numbers of Bangladeshi women applying to university since 1994. Through qualitative research with young Bangladeshi students and graduates, the chapter demonstrates that they have claimed agency and show agentic behaviour/autonomy to negotiate access to higher education institutions despite structural inequalities.

Similarly in Iran, women have been successful in education and the number of women who are highly educated has been increasing yet they face gender inequality in employment and decision-making roles. Elaheh Rostami-Povey shows by using statistical evidence how Iranian women are actively involved in challenging gender oppression and through their recognisable agency demystify Western stereotypical understandings of Iranian and Muslim women. The chapter shows the importance of diversity in the production of feminist knowledge and through a geographical and historical contextualisation, it illustrates the complexities involved in women's liberation and hearing their voices.

The activism and agency of women has been highlighted further in Part II which focusses on gender security in India, Burundi, Liberia, and South Africa. The chapter by Adrija Dey and Bev Orton examines how Indian feminist activists have organised to challenge oppression and have their voices heard on the reporting of sexual violence. The chapter applies intersectionality (class, caste, religion, geography) as a framework of analysis to understand the impact of the Nirbhaya (fearless) gang rape case (Delhi, December 2012), on the women's movement in India. Through a case study approach which analyses data from online news reports, videos, articles, blogs and social media postings, the authors show how the protests in major Indian cities resulted in government action with reference to violence against women. In the following chapter, Maria Martin de Almagro uses the case study of the transnational advocacy campaign for the implementation of the UNSCR1325 on women, peace and security to discuss gender security in Burundi and Liberia. Through the transnationalisation of local women activists, she shows how understandings of gender security affect advocacy for gender policies. Based on interviews conducted in both countries Martin de Almagro demonstrates how women's organisations in post-conflict contexts negotiate discourses and strategies to be used when

advocating together for the implementation of international norms on gender security.

In her chapter, Bev Orton uses feminist theory and intersectionality to discuss gender security and sexuality in post-Apartheid South Africa where despite the existence of the Women's Charter and the Equality Act (2000), the justice system fails to protect children and women. Bev Orton discusses the normalisation of violence against women and presents the social reality of living in South Africa. Due to the increasing sexualisation of society and a masculine understanding of sexuality, sexual violence has increased and rape of heterosexual and homosexual women remains under reported in South Africa. Orton therefore puts forward that women's exclusion and isolation from security issues need to be challenged and points to female agency at grassroots level and protest to demand change.

If there is inadequate protection for women in the countries above, we have to ask the question why there is an assumption that oppressive practices and patriarchal structures can be challenged by appealing to human rights and the rule of law. After all this would imply full citizenship and rights. However if we look to the nature of citizenship and the relevance to challenging powerful patriarchal structures we can see that the concept itself is contested. Citizenship 'is therefore always inflected by power and by the commonsense assumptions of hegemonic cultural and political elites' (Werbner and Yuval-Davis, 1999, pp.1-3) which is evident in Part III in the four chapters that look at the body of the woman, nation and performance. Although agency is characterised as ambiguous and contradictory, it emerges as an important part of micropolitics. The diversity of the nation is presented through the female body in this section which looks specifically at how citizenship does not necessarily result in equal representation of diverse groups of women. Jaya Gajparia's chapter on the poverty of being a woman demonstrates how the voices and agency of the women assumed to be victims, contribute to the debate on urban poverty. Gajparia's innovative use of a multi-methods approach that draws on participatory action research, participant observation and ethnography, provides a microanalysis of experiences and perceptions of gender and poverty in Mumbai, India. It puts forward new insights into everyday forms of agency, resistance and subversion while confronting Western ideas of development and colonial understandings of

victimhood. The chapter reveals how agency can be acquired through bargaining and negotiation, deception, manipulation, subversion and resistance. This puts forward a more nuanced and complex approach to understanding agency and structural oppression.

Similarly despite the perceived lack of agency of indigenous Peruvian women who went through forced sterilization, Donatella Maraschin and Suzanne Scafe examine a range of media outputs that have raised this case as a violation of human rights. It has contributed to the women being transformed from digitally marginalised towards being considered networked subjects, that is empowered through a recorded public performance as part of the *Quipu Project*. The chapter investigates how media configure witness subjects, audiences and listeners. By drawing on theories of witnessing, Maraschin and Scafe use secondary data in the form of women's testimonies that have in most cases been edited by documentary filmmakers and campaigners, to analyse an experimental project such as the *Quipu Project*. They highlight the narrative potential of digital technology to make effective interventions into campaigns for justice and reparation, in particular the indigenous Peruvian women.

The sexuality and morality of the female body's involvement in the public performance of the carnival in Trinidad and Tobago is the subject of the third chapter in this section. It reveals the carnival setting as central to the role of race and gender in the national culture and psyche *and* highlights the agency of women involved in mas⁷ performance. Based on ethnographic research in the form of interviews with young Indian Trinidadian women, Kavyta Raghunandan explores how gender and race highlight how agency, articulated as sexual liberation and 'free-up', is enabled and disabled in relation to mas performance. By problematising the mixed and multicultural image of carnival, this chapter contributes to an analysis of women's voices which do not typically feature in discourses of race, gender and the nation. The following chapter explores how gender has been an integral part of the nation building project in popular Hindi cinema (Bollywood) and focusses on the analysis of post-liberalisation mainstream popular Hindi films. Supported by data from interviews

⁷ Playing mas generally means to wear a costume during Carnival and perform a masquerade with one of the many mas bands which vary according to size: mini, small, medium or large.

with prominent members of the film industry, Priyasha Kaul illustrates the contribution made by popular Hindi cinema to the mainstream discourse on post-liberalisation nationalism. It highlights gender as central to the tension between tradition and modernity that is played out in films. Although gender politics has been questioned, the resolutions proposed continue to fit an essentialised nationalist narrative.

The challenge to a woman's position in the world is evident in how she is (re)presented, therefore, it is important to consider how cultural forms not only convey important messages about gender inequality but also challenge oppression and marginalisation. Although cultural forms do not necessarily mean more freedom for women, they are important for challenging powerful discourses. It is with this in mind that Part IV of the book is concerned with women's voices expressed through literature and poetry. Carole Boyce Davies highlights how women have moved from the margin to the centre of African literature and as a consequence challenged the failures of the state. This chapter engages in literary and cultural analyses of selected texts, revealing how a range of current issues such as women's rights are discussed. Although women's rights were raised by the previous generation of writers, Boyce Davies contrasts this with the work of younger African writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who are immersed in issues related to migration and the experiences of diasporic settlement. The theme of migration and diasporic experiences is evident in Jocelyn Watson's story about a young Syrian woman called Suha who flees Syria at the request of her family with her younger brother. Watson comments at the beginning of the chapter before the story starts that she was compelled to write this to highlight gender based violence that many women have to endure. The author of this story hopes that people's minds will be opened to the plight of refugees fleeing war torn countries against their will and the inhumanity they suffer as a consequence.

Although the writing of women may be regarded as 'emotional', the reflections they offer on sexual violence, unacceptable desire and exclusion indicates that emotions are moving, that we are moved by them, *and* that they connect us to our history, each other as collectivities, to our bodies and external structures (Ahmed, 2004). It can be seen so far that collective identities and the expression of agency are

important for social change and challenging oppressive practices. It is often the case that control over women's sexuality is required especially when patriarchy is challenged. The negotiation of identity at a personal level is important with reference to female sexuality, especially when there is female transgression. Transgression is shown in Monica Ali's fictional work, *Brick Lane* (2004) which represents a (seemingly) passive diasporic woman who goes through a 'sexual awakening' and in Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1996) in which two married women become involved in a 'forbidden' relationship. Patriarchal discourse finds female desire unacceptable therefore women are expected to conform through self-sacrifice and denial of self-expression. Although disempowerment of women is variable, where such disempowering discourses exist for heterosexual women, it is equally important to consider how women who represent the 'other', that is lesbian become empowered and claim their agency. The contribution made by Dorothea Smartt, conveys a range of emotions about the desires associated with being a diasporic lesbian woman in the West.

The range of writing in this collection highlights a complex, uneven and contradictory matrix of discourses, institutional spheres and terrains which points to the need for a more nuanced conceptualisation of agency. Thus, the agency of women can be conceived as a dynamic space of manoeuvre within and between discourses, places, spaces and institutional and cultural forms regarded as a kind of work in progress. During the first decade of the twenty first century, the concepts of diversity, inclusion and equality attracted increasing attention, therefore, *Gender and Race Matter: Global Perspectives on Being a Woman* is a timely addition to the literature available on gender, social justice and political agency. However, the underlying question is whether we can generate a fair and inclusive society that takes into account that women make up half the world's population. The answer lies in promoting gender equality and social justice which strike at the heart of policy making. These are central to the work of the contributors in this collection.

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Editor

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