<u>Women's Studies in Focus</u>
Women's Organizing:
A Gateway to a New Approach for Women's Studies

Linda Briskin

ABSTRACT

Women's organizing as a subject of study privileges women's agency and encourages students to redefine themselves as political actors. It offers a unique opportunity to demonstrate the relevance of often inaccessible debates in feminist theory, for example, about fluid identities, feminism as process, and contextual analysis. This article explores four ways of examining women's organizing that provide entry points into theory: the disaggregation of women's organizing and feminist organizing; the emphasis on context and strategic relativism; the move from identity politics to strategic alliances; and the differentiation of international, global and transnational organizing.

RÉSUMÉ

L'organisation des femmes comme sujet d'étude privilègie les agences féminines et encourage les étudiantes à se redéfinir comme acteures politiques. Ceci offre une occasion unique de démontrer la pertinence des débats souvent inaccessibles dans la théorie féministe, par exemple, au sujet des identités fluides, le féminisme en tant que processus, et l'analyse contextuelle. Cet article explore quatre façons d'étudier les organisation féminines, qui donnent des points d'entrée dans la théorie féministe; la désagrégation des organisations féministes; l'accent sur le contexte, et le relativisme stratégique; le changement des politiques d'identité aux alliance politiques; et la différentiation de l'organisation internationale, globale et transnationale.

Women have a long and remarkable history of organizing to resist oppression, expand their rights as women and citizens, protect their families and communities, defend traditional values, and change their societies. They have organized in, through and sometimes against revolutionary, nationalist and transnational movements, unions, autonomous women's movements and mainstream political institutions; states, schools, workplaces, communities, and religious institutions; public and private spaces; and issues and identities. Too often, however, women's studies programmes have not highlighted this organizing. Where once it might have been difficult to mount courses on women's organizing given the lack of documentation and scholarship, this is no longer the case. The last decade has seen an explosion of publication in this area.[1]

I now teach both a graduate and undergraduate course on Women Organizing in the School of Women's Studies at York University, Toronto, Ontario.[2] Initially I was prompted to introduce the undergraduate course because of inadequate background on women's organizing among the students in my fourth-year Feminist Theory class. Without this kind of preparation, students found it difficult to contextualize theoretical works, and to assess theory in relationship to its implications (often buried) for making change.

Now I believe that such courses can revitalize our women's studies programmes. Not only do they inspire and challenge students, but they offer a unique and accessible entry into current debates in feminist theory.

In the first instance, the study of women's organizing challenges students' political pessimism. The enormous gains that have resulted from women's organizing helps to clarify the dialectic between agency and structure (Wharton 1991). What women have been able to accomplish even within terrible constraints resonates with Marx's comment that humans make history but not in circumstances of their own choosing.[3] Students come to understand that some degree of agency is always possible, and that resistance re-configures constraints.

One remarkable example is the

Self-Employed Women's Association [SEWA] in India. The great majority of working women in India - ninety-four per cent - are self-employed, eking out marginal livelihoods as small scale vendors selling food, household goods, and garments; home-based producers such as weavers, milk producers, and handicraft producers; and labourers selling their services or labour, including agricultural and construction workers, cooks, and cleaners. For these workers, conventional forms of trade unionism are not possible. Yet SEWA began in 1972 as a trade union of self-employed women, drawing on Gandhi's notion that a union should cover all aspects of workers' lives, both in the factory and at home. Not only does SEWA endorse trade unionism, it also organizes co-operatives as a vehicle to develop alternative economic systems though which workers control what they produce. SEWA's membership has grown from 6000 in 1981 to 46,000 in 1994; and from one cooperative to forty (Jhabvala 1994). SEWA's inspiring success demonstrates to students that even the most vulnerable of women workers can organize effectively and reminds those of us from the North how much we can learn from women in the South.

The wealth and breadth of women's organizing, some feminist, some not, also re-positions activism from a marginal to a mainstream activity. For those students who have internalized negative stereotypes of feminists, activists and organizing, this represents an important shift. Engagement with this material also helps students to redefine their perceptions of what constitutes politics, and to deconstruct those ideologies which confine the political to the electoral. They can then recognize that "not being political," a stance many of them claim with a certain vigour, does not represent neutrality; in fact, nothing is outside the political nor innocent of it. This process encourages students to understand themselves as political actors.

Second, women's studies courses undoubtedly function as a vehicle for consciousness raising. Liz Kelly, Jill Radford and Joan Scanlon argue that, in the UK, as the numbers of women's groups and popular publications have decreased, "academic women's studies is becoming the primary route of access to knowledge about and potential involvement in the women's movement" (2000, 9). I suspect there is a lot of truth in this statement for the Canadian context, especially for young women.

Out of the second wave Consciousness Raising (CR) process came an important insight: the personal is political. Although there have been a variety of interpretations of this slogan, a consensus emerged then that the problems women faced were political and social, not individual. Undoubtedly, this insight helped to inspire action-oriented political groups (Adamson, Briskin and McPhail 1988).

Although we need to problematize a focus on personal experience, self disclosure and "opinions" in an academic context (Briskin 1998), women's studies classes do function, to some extent, like the CR groups of the second wave. However, unlike the CR group, they are not usually designed to encourage the transformation of personal insight into political activity. The study of women's organizing is one curricular response to this end.

Third, although the study of women's organizing does not focus solely on organizing for women's rights,[4] students are often shocked to discover how much they have taken for granted about their liberal citizenship rights: about access to abortion, the right to vote, to own property, to control their own wages, to go to medical school, to have custody of their children. These revelations open up a useful discussion about the citizenship rights currently under attack and serve to problematize grand narratives such as "progress."

Students often internalize the naturalization of progress: the commonsense belief in a linear movement towards equality. An ideology that things will naturally get better makes social justice organizing less necessary and less acceptable. The history of women's organizing demonstrates a much more contradictory movement toward improvement for women and challenges students' assumptions that what has been won is protected. It also helps students understand the postmodern challenge to teleological views of history and grand narratives like progress. Deconstructing "progress" highlights its fragility and simultaneously the importance of women's agency. A more positive future is possible but not inevitable. Only through individual and collective struggle will it happen.

Once "progress" is interrogated it is also possible to take on the "ethics of progress"

embedded in modernist assumptions, for example, "the implication that countries that are more economically developed (in the sense of capitalist markets) are, for that very reason, farther along the path to the rational human ideal of progress and equality than other countries. This suggests that a paternalistic relationship between Northern and Southern countries is ethically justified" (Ferguson 1998, 97). Such paternalism (or maternalism) prompts a missionary attitude among students expressed in the desire to rescue Third World women, and simultaneously in a refusal to problematize the role of the North in producing the economic conditions in the South (Hase 2001).

Fourth, the literature on women's organizing helps students to envision alternatives to the current economic and political configurations. Dominant ideologies encourage students to feel that what exists is natural and as a result, no alternatives are possible. At the same time, at least one thread of students' discomfort with feminism is a concern that feminisms criticize without positive and hopeful alternatives. I continue to have great success using Marge Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Students have also been excited by the historical work of Dolores Hayden (1984), Barbara Taylor (1983) and Meredith Tax (1980), and contemporary accounts of women's success (Krauss 1998; Kemp 1995; Rowbotham and Mitter 1994; and Swerdlow 1989). In particular, the material on international and transnational organizing (discussed in more detail below) furnishes encouraging examples of working across complex differences (Moghadam 2000; Christiansen-Ruffman 1996; Day 1996).

The innovative results of women's organizing challenge student resignation and make visible the "naturalism" which implies inevitability about social organization. Indeed, students make the link to the naturalization of the marketplace and then dispute the arguments that interventions into the market (for example, minimum wage laws, pay equity, employment equity) will disturb its natural workings.

Fifth, such courses help to problematize students' concerns about the lack of "unity" in the women's movement. The study of women's participation in large-scale "homogenous" movements (the strategic expression of unity) such as male-dominated unions, socialist, nationalist or revolutionary movements graphically illustrates the

way that such structures often disadvantage marginal voices. Although there is an indisputable (although abstract) attraction to bringing everyone together in one large movement, examining the contexts in which women are most empowered helps students to see the importance of the local. Local organizing, what students might see as "fragmentation," may provide the basis for coalition work in which such groups come together from positions of strength, preserving their particular voices while undertaking joint initiatives. Such coalitions and alliances offer an alternative paradigm to large-scale homogenous movements.

Sixth, courses on women's organizing provide a small laboratory in which to examine some of the issues that are raised in course material: about organizational strategies, dealing with diversity, and enhancing inclusivity and democracy. Linking these debates directly to classroom practices provides important learning moments.

Finally, the study of women's organizing demonstrates the relevance of some often inaccessible debates in feminist theory, for example, about fluid identities, feminism as process, and contextual and historical analysis. Below I explore four ways of examining women's organizing that provide an entry point into theory: the disaggregation of women's organizing and feminist organizing; the emphasis on context and strategic relativism; the move from identity politics to strategic alliances and the construction of identities through coalition and negotiation; and the differentiation of international, global and transnational organizing.

DISAGGREGATING WOMEN'S ORGANIZING AND FEMINIST ORGANIZING

Focusing on women's organizing rather than feminist organizing opens up space to study the considerable range of women's organizing that is not identified with feminism (such as nationalist, maternalist, revolutionary and social justice organizing) or is explicitly anti-feminist. It problematizes relationships rather than making *a priori* assumptions.

Such an approach resists the reification of feminisms. It allows the relationship between women's organizing and feminisms as ideologies,

strategies, analyses, organizing practices, visionary alternatives, and complex self-identifications and identities to be interrogated. Feminisms emerge, then, not as abstract criteria or boundary markers against which women's organizing is assessed but as a fluid, contextually located set of meanings and practices. Feminisms are sites of struggle, moments of resistance, organizing tools; they help produce communities of interest but also patterns of exclusion.

Investigating rather than assuming the relationship between women's organizing and feminism is essential for exploring third world contexts. It engages critiques of "western feminism," and challenges Eurocentric and classist assumptions that the subject of study should be "women's" issues. Simultaneously, it helps resist tendencies to homogenize "western feminism," recognizing instead the multiplicity of feminisms struggling for voice in the west.

Ella Shohat suggests that:

> Eurocentric definitions of feminism have cast "third world" women into a fixed stereotypical role, in which they play the part of passive victims lacking any form of agency. Within standard feminist historiography, for example, "third world women's" involvement in anticolonialist struggles has not been perceived as relevant for feminism. Since the anticolonialist struggles of colonized women were not explicitly labelled "feminist," they have not been "read" as linked or as relevant to feminist studies....Yet the participation of colonized women in anticolonialist and antiracist movements did often lead to a political engagement with feminism....I have reread the activism of third-world women through the period of colonization and decolonization as a kind of subterranean, unrecognized form of feminism, and, therefore, as a legitimate part of feminist historiography.   (2001, 1269-70)

Like Shohat, I am concerned that, as part of the women's studies project, we engage with the struggles of colonized women and resist their re-victimization through ethnocentric scholarship.

I, too, would argue that these struggles are "relevant to feminism." However, I would caution about labelling such organizing as "feminist" in order to legitimize it. In fact, such labelling may itself contribute to both the hegemony and reification of western feminism, and to the privileging of those forms of women's organizing which are named as feminist. Rather, Women's Studies needs to valorize the study of women's organizing in all its complex and variegated forms, and to problematize the relationship of such organizing to feminism.

For students, this framework challenges essentialized views of feminisms. They often envision a programmatic feminism "out there" which they have to accept or reject. As feminisms are understood less as a program and more as a political process, students are more likely to define a feminism that makes sense to them and to write themselves into the project of developing feminisms.

STRATEGIC RELATIVISM

The study of women's organizing challenges abstract programmatic commitments to particular strategies and highlights the significance of strategic relativism. It emphasizes contextual analysis of particular strategies and introduces students to the difference between historical materialist and transhistorical approaches. One cogent example which helps to historicize their sense of strategy has to do with separate organizing. This example is worth exploring since women's studies students tend to have strong feelings that separate organizing for women is either the quintessentially correct or incorrect strategy, their views often dependent on their understanding of the category of "woman" and their analyses of women's oppression.

The example of struggles around separate schooling shift their thinking considerably. In the nineteenth century, many progressive women argued fiercely against separate schooling for girls because, in that context, separate schooling was a way of limiting access; it was a discriminatory practice. Similarly during the civil rights movement in the USA, blacks argued for school integration and school busing. However, in the current context, there have been progressive initiatives around separate schooling for girls and for black-focused

schools. Concomitant with such progressive innovations are calls for separate religious schools, and class-based schools. Undoubtedly, the meaning of separate schooling is subject to constant re-negotiation and is re-constituted through struggle and resistance.

An historical perspective, then, illuminates the difference between separate structures which are a response to imposed or forced segregation, and those which are chosen by women to articulate their concerns and strengthen their voices. Rather than producing discrimination, the latter represent a strategy to address discrimination (Briskin 1999b).

Another vivid illustration of how separate organizing must be situated within economic and ideological contexts can be found in recent work comparing women's organizing in Swedish and Canadian unions. In Canada, separate organizing has been a central and effective strategy of union women. In Sweden, women have been reluctant to organize separately, especially through formal structures, inside or outside the unions. These different approaches reflect dominant ideologies about equality and gender. In Sweden, an emphasis on common interests between women and men (a gender-neutral approach), which has supported innovative family and labour market policies also translates into a discomfort with difference and with separate organizing. In Canada, a focus on power imbalances and on diversity of region, language, gender, race and ethnicity provides support for it (Briskin 1999a).

So although organizing separately appears grounded in the abstract sameness/difference debate, students come to reject this essentialist reading in favour of a more strategic and historical one. Separate organizing is neither accepted nor rejected *a priori* as an appropriate strategy but is subjected to a conjunctural and contextual assessment of its viability. Separate organizing, then, is not an ahistorical or static principle but one negotiated and re-negotiated in historical circumstances.

Student concerns that this approach may suffer from a lack of "foundational" principles opens up a discussion about the complexity of political ethics and the problems with foundationalism. Ann Ferguson argues for an ethico-politics called a "modified empowerment paradigm," especially for Northern feminist researchers whose "reliance on universalist code ethics allows them to abstract from their own privileged position as constructors of knowledge" (1998, 104).

> Even though feminist materialist ethics rejects a universalist and fixed approach to ethical values based on some unchanging "authentic" human nature, it does not follow that ethical values are entirely subjective or relative. (98)

> Unlike the totally contextual ethics of Northern postmodern feminists, however, the ethico-politics of such an approach insists on developing universal visions of social justice (for example, that women's rights are human rights), but doing so not by abstracting away local contexts.[5] (103)

Students come to see that contextual analysis forces them to make decisions about what constitutes an ethical political position, and simultaneously an appropriate strategy in each particular instance. Such a process demonstrably increases individual and collective agency.

IDENTITY POLITICS VERSUS STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

Examining diversity, identity and coalition politics through the study of women's organizing poses a challenge to the politics of victimization, the romanticized commitments to sisterhood often expressed by undergraduate women's studies students, and the strategic paralysis sometimes effected by identity politics.

Despite their acknowledgement of differences, by and large, my undergraduate students remain hopefully committed to the idea of unity and common cause among women. Many embrace sisterhood as an alternative to individualism and consumerist promotion of bodily competition among women. Their study of organizing, however, brings them up against the limits of unproblematized essentialized notions of sisterhood. At the same time, the practice of women's organizing offers up alternative visions of working across difference and negotiating alliances, and helps students nuance their strategic thinking.

Such study highlights the relevance of postmodern theorizing about identity to effective coalition politics. Theorizing the practices of diversity means recognizing, on the one hand, that gender, class, race, ability and sexuality influence organizational strategies and political perspectives; on the other hand, these identities are not stable, mutually exclusive or comparable in a hierarchy of oppression. Liberatory postmodern theories concerned with political strategy provide a lens for this discussion in their decentring of the search for coherence, linearity, and generality and their refocusing on specificity, locality, and multiplicity.

Students find the concept of fluid identities counter-intuitive to their commonsense and often deeply internalized notions of essentialist personalities and universalized identities. This way of thinking is made accessible through the study of organizing which demonstrates that in strategic contexts, the meaning of identities is not fixed but relationally constituted and always negotiated. Identities are not fixed barriers to alliances nor do common identities guarantee alliances; rather, alliances are negotiated in practice, always fraught yet always possible.

Writing about South African feminism, Amanda Kemp et al. uses the term "strategic alliances" to describe this process, "Black women understand that they need to make strategic alliances, recognizing that these alliances may be temporary and limited to particular common interests rather than built on assumed, ongoing sisterhood. Further, these interests are fluid, and struggle over their validity across class or race lines will help deepen our solidarity and strengthen our position" (1995, 143). Undoubtedly the most successful text that I have found for working with these ideas is Cynthia Cockburn's remarkable *The Space Between Us* in which she describes her involvement in three women's projects which have struggled to co-operate across conflict: in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and Bosnia/Hercegovina. This book combines a complex analysis of collective identities, nationalism and democracy with the study of the practices of women's organizing.

She examines the often coercive and always essentializing nature of collective identities in nationalist struggles:

> Many (sometimes it seems most) identity processes are coercive. We are labelled, named, known by identities that confine us, regulate us and reduce our complexity. The subtleties in our sense of self are difficult to convey in the terms available to us. We often feel misunderstood and misrepresented. And these processes are the more painful because they exploit our irreducible need to belong, our happiness in belonging. (1998, 216)

The struggle of these women's groups around coerced identities makes understandable the notion that an individual's sense of self is "a production, which is never complete, always in process" (Cockburn quoting Stuart Hall, 212). Cockburn's study emphasizes that, "collective identities, such as gender and national identities, no matter in how essentialist a form they are dressed by politically interested parties, actually [are] lived by individuals as *changeable* and unpredictable. And the way they take shape and change is *relational*. In other words, there is no thinkable specification of selfhood that does not have reference to other people, known or imagined" (212).

In these three conflict-ridden situations alliances are built through negotiation and are not based on abstract identity positionings. The women struggle with what Cockburn calls the "non-closure on identity":

> They do not essentialize identities and therefore do not predict what might flow from them. They are unusually willing to wait and see, to believe there may be many ways of living, for example, a Protestant identity.... [T]hey avoid ascribing thoughts or motivations or qualities to others on the basis of their ethnic or national label.... Likewise [they] will avoid ascribing collective guilt: you are not to be held accountable for everything done in your name. As the Medici women like to say... "You judge people by what they do, not what they are." (225)

Identities as relational reveals the shifting realities of privilege and discrimination, highlights the

importance of context and resists absolutes. The move away from absolutes shifts attention to processes rather than categories. Rather than race and gender, "racialization" and "genderization" capture the way in which the meanings of these identities are constantly being reshaped as a result of context, history and struggle. Racialization is a process of defining the Other and simultaneously defining a dominant group. It makes visible political, social, and historical processes and rejects the significance of the inherently biological.[6]

Understanding identity "as something complex, ambiguous and shifting" (Cockburn 213) helps students to recognize the limits of essentialized notions of sisterhood and simultaneously highlights another strategic dilemma. In 1990 Ann Snitow talked about:

> the common divide between the need to build the identity "woman" and give it a solid political meaning and the need to tear down the very category "woman" and dismantle its all-too-solid history....
> [T]hough a constant choosing of sides is tactically unavoidable, feminists - and indeed most women - live in a complex relationship to this central feminist divide. From moment to moment we perform subtle psychological and social negotiations about how gendered we choose to be. This tension - between needing to act as women and needing an identity not overdetermined by gender - is as old as Western feminism. (9-10)

Linda Alcoff suggested combining "the concept of identity politics with a conception of the subject as positionality":

> We can conceive of the subject as nonessentialized and emergent from a historical experience and yet retain our political ability to take gender as an important point of departure. Thus we can say at one and the same time that gender is not natural, biological, universal, ahistorical, or essential and yet still claim that gender is relevant because we are taking gender as a position from which to act politically. (1988, 433)

It is in organizing contexts that the tension between the non-essentialized subject and the significance of gender identities plays itself out strategically.[7] Undoubtedly, identity can be a powerful political tool: "gender" can mobilize even as gender is constituted relationally and contextually, and understood as a process. Cockburn grapples with these tensions. She seeks to understand how the women's groups "get around and above the immobilizing contradiction: between a dangerous belief in universal sisterhood and a relativist stress on difference that dooms us to division and fragmentation" (8).[8] She draws on the notion of transversal politics articulated by Nira Yuval-Davis: "In 'transversal politics,' perceived unity, and homogeneity are replaced by dialogues which give recognition to the specific positionings of those who participate in them as well as to the 'unfinished knowledge' that each such situated positioning can offer.... The boundaries of a transversal dialogue are determined by the message rather than the messenger" (quoted in Cockburn 1998, 9).

Cockburn argues finally for agonistic democracy which "breaks with the comfortable and dangerous illusion of 'community' and the politics of communitarianism, that assumes consensus is (must be) possible. Instead it settles for the difficult reality of unavoidable, unending, careful, respectful struggle" (216). This understanding of unavoidable respectful struggle not only offers students a vision of what is possible in troubled times but also underscores the ongoing agency involved in these negotiations.

Through the study of political practice, students can then make sense of Judith Butler's complex argument:

> The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated. This kind of a critique brings into question the foundationalist frame in which feminism as an identity politics has been articulated. The internal paradox of this foundationalism is that it presumes, fixes, and constrains the very "subjects" that it hopes to represent and liberate.
> (quoted in Martin 1992, 102).

Butler explains:

> We may be tempted to think that to assume the subject in advance is necessary to safeguard the *agency* of the subject. But to claim that subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, rather the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency (12).... Paradoxically, it may be that only through releasing the category of women from a fixed referent that something like "agency" becomes possible.   (1992, 16)

In sharp contrast to my experience teaching these debates in a feminist theory class, in a course on organizing they are vivid and relevant. In this context, students simultaneously critique essentialized notions of sisterhood, reject "common experience" or "shared victimization" as the premises of unity, and embrace negotiated solidarities that recognize both diversities and the instability of identities. Solidarity is demonstrably built through struggle. Context, negotiation and political agency become the central concepts.

INTERNATIONAL, TRANSNATIONAL AND GLOBAL WOMEN'S ORGANIZING

Undoubtedly students find most exciting the new initiatives in international and transnational women's organizing. In these arenas, women are working strategically and often successfully across identity, region and political differences. The teaching challenge is to deal with this material in ways that do not reinscribe a reconstituted conception of sisterhood, that is, to facilitate students shifting from "romantic sisterhood" to "strategic sisterhood" (Agarwal, quoted in Tohidi 1996, 30).

Situating such organizing in its historical context is one useful strategy. Leila Rupp recounts the history of three first wave organizations (1998): the International Council of Women founded in 1888, which by 1925 had 36 million members through National Councils of Women; the International Alliance of Women founded in 1904 to fight for suffrage; and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom founded in 1915

(Stienstra 1994). Not surprisingly, the majority of the participants were elite white Christian women. Ruth Rosen points out that this similarity of background "allowed them to forge unity out of the diversity of their national differences (and served to exclude women of other races and religions)" (1998, 3). Examining these first-wave international women's organizations highlights exclusionary organizational and political practices which can emerge from a unity based on homogeneity of class, race and religious identities, despite differences in nationality.

It also shifts students' perceptions of "international relations." Despite the fact that women have been organizing at the international level for more than a century, like so much herstory, it is not commonly recognized. Too often, the international arena has been masculinized as a result of limited scholarly and media focus on state politics, foreign diplomacy, and military conflicts.

Disaggregating the concepts of international, transnational, local and global also provides a foundation for an alternative paradigm to romantic sisterhood. To fully engage with these concepts is beyond the scope of this paper so here I will focus on two arguments: the need to reject the language of global feminism, and the value of differentiating between transnational and international organizing.

In the first instance, the language of "global feminism" is highly problematic. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argue that: "'[G]lobal feminism' has stood for a kind of Western cultural imperialism...[and] has elided the diversity of women's agency in favour of a universalised Western model of women's liberation that celebrates individuality and modernity. Anti-imperialist movements have legitimately decried this form of 'feminist' globalizing" (1994, 17). Global feminism, then, asserts the commonality of women in an international arena. It is part of a western master narrative and assumes alliances among women rather than pro-actively building links cognizant of differences.[9] Transnational organizing is an alternative formulation. It recognizes that the structures of global capitalism, corporate rule and religious fundamentalism are affecting women everywhere but in structurally asymmetrical ways. As a result, alliances are possible, and necessary. But they will only be

successful if local differences are kept in focus, and if the gaze on difference refuses to construct exotic subjects - that is, it is not a western gaze. Transnational feminist solidarities are a new way of building alliances based on agency rather than shared victimization. They graphically challenge the argument that alliances are not possible because of difference but they also go well beyond simply recognizing difference.

Grewal and Kaplan recognize the imperative to:

> address the concerns of women around the world in the historicized particularity of their relationship to multiple patriarchies as well as to international economic hegemonies... We need to articulate the relationship of gender to scattered hegemonies such as global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, "authentic" forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-juridical oppression. (17)

Such new cross-border alliances are emerging from increasingly shared economic realities, despite the divergent and asymmetrical ways in which women in the North, South and East experience restructuring. Writing about the 1995 Beijing Conference, Charlotte Bunch, Malika Dutt, and Swana Fried emphasize this point:

> Women from North America and Western Europe discussed economic restructuring with its cutbacks in social services and health care in ways that echoed the devastation of structural adjustment policies described by women from the Third World. And the new voices of women from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union ...also reported their negative experiences in the transition to market economies.... [W]omen from all regions saw international economic and trade policies as placing increasing burdens on them.   (1996, 9)

Ana Isla, Angela Miles and Sheila Molloy (1996, 116) note the "broad consensus among those lobbying in Beijing that the current global system is flawed at its deepest level."[10] The remarkable NGO [Non-Governmental Organizations] Beijing declaration, written over "three days of intensive consultation by participants from every region of the world" (118) was a collective response to the mainstreaming strategy of the Platform for Action, the main UN [United Nations] document, which excluded most clauses relevant to economic justice and the macro socio-economic context (for a copy of the text, see Christiansen-Ruffman 1996.)

An emphasis on the leadership of women from the South needs to be at the centre of the study of such organizing in order to counteract the tendency of students to see Third World women as victims of "underdevelopment" and "barbaric" patriarchal practices such as genital surgeries:

> Women from the economic South have played a major role in developing feminist understanding of the deeply negative aspects of the global economy and the "growth" and "development" pursued as an unquestioned good in its name. But feminists from the economic North increasingly share this understanding.
> (Isla, Miles and Molloy 1996, 116)

In her struggle to globalize her curriculum, Michiko Hase, a foreign-born woman of colour teaching in the US, explores American students' attitudes to Third World women. She identifies "American students' sense of superiority, mixed with their missionary attitude (they have to 'rescue' 'poor Third World sisters' from oppressive local cultures), their voyeurism, and their binary world view of 'us' versus 'them'" (2001, 95). Hase has a two pronged strategy: to emphasize the "ways in which the US government, US-led international institutions, and US corporations might create or contribute to the 'plight' of Third World women and ways in which they, the students, might be benefiting from US hegemony in the global economy" (102) and to highlight the "agency and activism of Third World women" (90). In my view this emphasis on agency is critical.[11]

Second, although the meanings of these terms are contested, and invariably the boundaries between them are permeable, differentiating transnational from international organizing helps make visible forms of women's organizing that

might be otherwise subsumed. I see the international as a supra-national arena, that is, an arena in which nations come together in formal structures representing "national" interests (often mis-represented as homogenous). It operates through and in international organizations and agencies such as the United Nations. Women organizing in the international arena do so both from inside and outside these structures. They attempt to alter the policies and practices of international organizations such as the UN (Reanda 1999), and may try to use these policies as levers to make change in their own national arenas (Roberts 1996).

In contrast, the transnational does not operate through the structures of nations, and those involved do not see themselves as representing nations, although of course, since they are always "nationalized" (as they are also racialized, classed and gendered) the boundaries between nations do not disappear. Rather, transnational organizing maintains the local and the particular in the transnational context and thus resists the tendency to the national homogenization of the international arena. The local-transnational relation allows the development of a working agenda even as it is understood that women are differentially affected by similar processes, of globalization, for example.[12] The goal is to transform the local through transnational contact, and in some cases, to have an impact on the international arena. The emphasis on the local in transnational organizing also provides a basis to reject the language of global feminism.

Distinguishing between international and transnational is important because it makes visible organizing that is often erased by the focus on formal structures like the UN. It problematizes the relationship between international and transnational organizing rather than taking it for granted.

International and transnational initiatives not only help to refine students' understandings of working across difference, they also offer a unique and somewhat optimistic entry into the study of global political economy. The globalization of capital and the growing permeability of national boundaries as a result of regional integration treaties like North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the European Union (EU) are negatively impacting on workers around the world.

Political and economic re-organization has meant deregulation, increasingly hostile neo-liberal states, "global" employers, wage competition across national boundaries and increasing corporate rule. The dismantling and redefinition of the welfare state in the industrialized countries, and the introduction of structural adjustment programs [SAPS] in the developing countries have resulted in privatization of public services and decreased state funding to services like health, education and family benefits, programs on which women depend and where they have often worked (often in better paid unionized positions).

These changes have politicized women and brought them to the forefront of resistance. They are also creating the basis for women to organize internationally and transnationally. Considering globalization through the lens of women's organizing challenges the resignation generated by such large-scale processes, and increases students' sense of the potential for agency and resistance, even in these difficult times.

CONCLUSION

Women's organizing as a subject of study is a gateway to a new approach for Women's Studies. The focus on women's organizing privileges agency and provides a new way to work with students around the complex intersections of theory, practice and experience. It can enhance the relevance of Women's Studies and encourage students to redefine themselves as political actors. Finally, such an approach inspires students, a not-insignificant achievement in the current context where equity gains are under serious attack and demoralization is often the norm.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

ENDNOTES

1. There are also many inspiring, provocative and revelatory films made about women's organizing which offer an important medium for deepening student understanding of women's organizing. My experience has been that films offer a vehicle to radicalize women about possibility, politics and agency. Here is a partial list of films I have used with a great success over the years.
Winds of Change (1999 55 mins)
Sweating for a T-shirt (1998 23 mins)
Fury for the Sound: the Women at Clayoquot (1997 86 mins)
Threads of Hope (1996 51 mins)
Women's March Against Poverty (1996 51 mins)
Beyond Beijing (1996 42 mins)
Ballot Measure 9 (1995 72 mins)
The Vienna Tribunal (1994 48 mins)
Keepers of the Fire (1994 55 mins)
The Voice of Women (1992 52 mins)
Rising Up Strong (1981/updated 1992 90 mins [2 parts])
Sisters in the Struggle (1991 50 mins)
You Have Struck a Rock (1981 28 mins)
Willmar 8 (1980 55 mins)
Wives' Tale (1980 73 mins)
With Babies and Banners (1978 45 mins)
Union Maids (1977 45 mins)

2. The frame of women's organizing has been central both in my scholarship and in my teaching, and is grounded in my activist experience in the Canadian women's movement and the movement of union women. As a scholar, I was driven originally by the desire to document and make visible women's organizing during the early second wave women's movement. This led to *Union Sisters* (1983), co-edited with Lynda Yanz. Later my interest shifted to theorizing the practice of women's organizing and to *Feminist Organizing for Change* (1988), co-authored with Nancy Adamson and Margaret McPhail and *Women's Organizing and Public Policy in Sweden and Canada* (1999), co-edited with Mona Eliasson.

3. On this issue, Joan Scott says: "[S]ubjects have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them. Being a subject means being 'subject to definite conditions of existence...' These conditions enable choices, although they are not unlimited" (1992, 34).

4. Guida West and Rhoda Blumberg (1990) have developed a typology about women and social protest that students find useful. They identify four types of protest activities in which women are involved: struggles to attack problems that directly threaten their economic survival and that of their families and children; nationalist or racial/ethnic issues in either groups demanding liberation or equality, or in countermovements demanding protection against erosion of status quo (KKK, anti-busing etc); movements that address humanistic/nurturing issues such as peace, environment, public education, prison reform, in which their collective actions in the public male sphere are justified as an extension of their nurturing responsibilities within the domestic sphere, actions which may encompass national or global "families"; and finally organizing on behalf of their own rights as women and for various groups of women (battered women, older women, child brides etc).

5. Ferguson continues: "We must also reject the relativism of poststructuralist critics who would leave us with a participatory democratic politics so pluralistic and contextualized that it lacks any generalizable base for solidarity politics" (104).

6. Although undoubtedly "race" as corporeality remains a part of the lived experience of many people (Barot and Bird 2001), the concept of "racialization" is very useful in resisting biologistic racism. Robert Miles, a key proponent of this usage, uses the concept of racialization "to refer to those instances where social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities. The concept therefore refers to a process of categorisation, a representational process of defining an Other (usually, but not exclusively) somatically" (quoted in Barot and Bird 2001, 610). Similarly, I think that "genderization" has similar value as a concept.

7. Sandra Gabriele (1997) comments on her experience as a practicum student working for Women's Action Coalition of Nova Scotia (WAC), an umbrella organization of grassroots women's groups. Where once she would have rejected an organization like WAC which purported to "speak for all its member women," she came to recognize that "political alliances can be formed across bodily, geographic, racial and sexual orientations according to common political agendas. These alliances are always partial, always temporary, but always politically potent. By allowing for such fluidity we create space for local alliances and coalition building in political activism" (123-4).

8. Shane Phelan (1993, 786) emphasizes the need to resist "the temptations to cloak crucial differences with the cloak of universality and to deny generalities for fear of essentialism."

9. Despite the fact that Valentine Moghadam (2000) is writing about transnational feminist networks, she still makes some problematic assumptions about global feminism. Global feminism "is predicated upon the notion that notwithstanding cultural, class and ideological differences among the women of the world, there is a commonality in the forms of women's disadvantage and the forms of women's organizations worldwide" (62). It seems to me that the language of transnational organizing can offer a paradigm to problematize "commonalities."

10. Nayereh Tohidi (1996, 30) finds a sharp contrast between Beijing and previous three world conferences on women, the key factor being the "relatively stronger sense of commonality and solidarity and much less political tension or ideological division. Apparently, the increasing international dialogue between women of the world, and the stronger voice of women from the 'Third World' as well as women of colour in the 'First World' in recent decades, has somewhat succeeded in bridging the conceptual gap between western feminists and women's groups from the developing countries. Women of the global North and South...came closer together not only because of a better appreciation of their differences in economic, socio-political, and cultural priorities, but also because today, many First World and Second World women are finding more common ground with Third World women on economic issues.... Confronted with the adverse implications of globalization, 'romantic sisterhood' is giving way to 'strategic sisterhood'" (Agarwal 2).

       Moghadam (2000) also notes the shift. "In the 1970s, clashes occurred among nationally or regionally framed feminisms, mainly due to disagreements between Western feminists, who tended to emphasize women's need for legal equality and sexual autonomy, and Third World feminists, who tended to emphasize imperialism and underdevelopment as obstacles to women's advancement. These arguments were especially noticeable at the First UN Conference on Women, which took place in Mexico City in 1975, and especially at the second conference, which took place in Copenhagen in 1980. During the decade of the 1980s, however, a shift took place.... Feminists from the North came to appreciate the relevance of economic conditions and foreign policies to women's lives, while feminists from the South came to recognize the pertinence of 'body politics'. The Nairobi conference in 1985 seems to have been the turning point" (61).

11. This article is part of larger text I am writing titled "Privileging Agency: A Strategy for Women's Studies in Troubled Times."

12. In her work on "transnational feminist networks" Moghadam (2000) examines professionalized organizations that work across national boundaries. For her, the TFNs [transnational feminist networks] supersede nationalist orientations and have universalistic objectives. TFNs consist "of active and autonomous local/national women's groups ...that transcend localisms or nationalisms. Their discourses and objectives are not particularistic but are universalistic. As such, these TFNs are situated in the tradition of progressive modernist politics, rather than in any new wave of postmodernist or identity politics" (77). For Moghadam, "TFNs acknowledge the diversity of women's experiences and the salience of class, ethnic and other *differences*, but do not appear to give difference the theoretical status or absolute character that postmodernists do" (77).

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