

**Third World Critiques of Western Feminist Theory in the Post-Development Era**

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### **Abstract**

A criticism that is often made of feminist theory in the United States is that its basic tenets and conclusions only apply to women in developed industrialized countries. Drawing upon this major statement, the paper examines ongoing dialogues articulated between U.S. and Third World feminist thought or -more broadly stated- between Western and Non Western feminism. The paper devotes particular attention to feminist theorization about the role of women in development processes and the advancement of women's status as discussed by major frameworks in the field. Main feminist approaches to development, as usually found in the literature, constitute multifaceted road maps into the field, more than totally coherent and mutually exclusive narratives. As helpful as they may be, these frameworks were mostly developed under the influence of subsequent versions of Western feminist theory, exporting to the rest of the world a set of visions and strategies that were context specific for Western women's movements. The paper scrutinizes the principal limitations that Third World feminist scholars have encountered in U.S. and European feminism to explain and interpret the advancement of women's rights in the developing world. Eliciting relevant criticism from scholars working within different theoretical traditions and drawing upon critiques from structural/historical analysis to actor oriented perspectives, the analysis brings to the fore the potentiality that these contributions entail for the understanding of women's status in less developed countries.

## Introduction

A criticism that is often made of feminist theory in the United States is that its basic tenets and conclusions only apply to women in developed industrialized countries. Drawing upon this major statement, the present paper tries to engage in ongoing dialogues articulated between U.S. and Third World feminist thought, or more broadly stated, between Western and Non Western feminism. The paper devotes particular attention to feminist theorization about the role of women in development processes and the advancement of women's status as discussed by major frameworks in this sub-field.

Our analysis begins with a brief characterization of main feminist approaches to development, as they are usually found in the literature: *Women in Development* (WID), *Women and Development* (WAD), *Gender and Development* (GAD). This suggested division needs to be taken as a possible road map that identifies broad conceptual approaches to the field of women/gender and development. However, far from being totally coherent and mutually exclusive, these domains overlap with each other in many respects and they shelter quite diverse approaches. Thus, as with most theoretical contributions, we need to put them in context and take them as arguments, responses and insights in a dialogue with one another, challenging and being mutually challenged.

As helpful as these frameworks may be, they were mostly developed under the influence of subsequent versions of Western feminist theory, exporting to the rest of the world a set of visions and strategies that were context specific for Western women's movements. Consequently, after portraying its major trends the objective of our paper is to identify some of the limitations that Third World feminist scholars have encountered in U.S. and European feminism to explain and interpret the advancement of women's rights in the developing world. While doing this we will be eliciting some criticism from scholars working within different theoretical traditions. Thus, by drawing upon critiques from structural/historical analysis to actor oriented perspectives, we also want to show the

potentiality that these frameworks entails for the understanding of women's status in less developed countries.

## **Feminist approaches to development**

When talking about feminist theories we are referring to a diverse and multifaceted corpus that resists simplifications or uniform labels. As a theoretical approach, feminism has been permanently engendering new versions of itself, reflected in the multiple qualifiers that have been progressively attached to its name (radical, cultural, socialist, and even psychoanalytic feminism, among others). Historically, also disparate regions of the world have led to the emergence of different versions of feminism, proving that contextual references do account for diversity in theoretical production. For the specific purpose of our paper, we need to understand the theoretical paths and imbrications of traditional feminism, in particular its dialogues with the Third World, and the type of counter arguments engendered in this region.

As an autonomous theoretical corpus, Feminism is characterized by its women centered orientation and its cross disciplinary approach, two attributes that might distinguish feminist theories from others currents. Feminist theorists are not only concern with understanding the situation of women and their position amidst unequal gender relations but identifying efficient strategies to “improve the social world so as to make it a more just place for women and for all people” (Ritzer, 2004). Historically, the emphasis on the practical implications that broader theoretical discussions have for the advancement in women rights has been typical of feminist theorists in all parts of the world and particularly in the US. Waves of feminist activism and organization were paralleled by varieties of feminist theorization that contributed to nurture the objectives and delineate the strategies for women's movements.

The upsurge of feminist activism in the 1970s and 1980s was accompanied by a prolific reflective activity among a variety of feminist scholars which led to the emergence of different theoretical perspectives, all sharing a common feminist background. It was the

encounter of this multifaceted current with the already institutionalized field of modernization and development what created the conditions for the emergence of the hegemonic *Women in Development* field. (Saunders, 2002). Subscribing the underlying assumptions of modernization theory, the Women in Development (WID) perspective assessed women's oppressive situation as the result of traditional societies characterized by authoritarianism and male-dominance (Visvanathan, 2002). Considering economic growth and technology incorporation as main channels for modernization, WID approach advocated for women integration to economic development prioritizing their productive dimensions. In the eyes of WID practitioners women were primarily perceived in their role of workers and mothers, though this approach was criticized by advocates who consider this a reinforcement of dependence and the weakness stereotype. Among WID scholars, the debates were usually articulated around the value of women's work and the need to adapt existing development theories to feminist frameworks. (Tinker, 2002).

It was maybe the liberal feminists in the West the ones who were better theoretically equipped to articulate the promises of development with improvements in women's conditions. Through the tools of economic efficiency, welfare, appropriate policies and planning, modernization would bring social change promoting women emancipation and delivering "*even greater benefits to women than men*" (Lewis, 1955, p. 422). However, Esther Boserup's seminal work in the 1970s challenged this vision within the boundaries of liberal feminism. Contrary to what modernization theory has predicted, she supported the idea that development in the Third World didn't trickle down to the poor exhibiting – instead- harmful effects on women status. In her work, men is presented as the one taking full advantage of the fruits of modernization while women remain relegated to rural settings, attached to more informal activities and having less access to technology. Overall, in Boserup's view modernization seems to reinforce women dependency and lessen the conditions for empowerment and autonomy. In the same vein, the criticisms introduced by Caroline Moser's evaluation of welfare programs in the Third World, suggest that many of these initiatives harden dependency of women from the patriarchal structures of the State and family and had little impact on altering existing gender roles. (Saunders, 2002)

Boserup's work played a significant role in advancing feminist theory, not only through its own original contributions but through the reactions it generated among other scholars. Marxist feminists like Beneria and Sen (2000), criticized Boserup's work for failing to integrate the implications of the capitalist mode of development into her analysis, ignoring the insights that derive from class division. Contrarily, the authors emphasize the role of capitalist accumulation and profit making in understanding the situation of women in the developing world. They opposed Boserup's blame on cultural prejudices for women marginalization nor they believe that technical modernization will –just by itself- improve women's conditions. The problem for women as they see it, "*is not only the lack of participation in this process as equal partners with men but their participation in a system that generates and intensifies inequalities, making use of existing gender hierarchies to place women in subordinate positions at each different level of interactions between class and gender*" (Beneria and Sen, 2000, p.139). While Boserup's analysis relies on the idea that modernization is both beneficial and inevitable, Beneria and Sen point out that she never discussed the role of capital accumulation on women's work and the differential effects across women of different classes. Neo-marxist and dependence theorists such as Beneria and Sen are usually grouped under the label of *Women and Development (WAD)*, implying that women are not excluded from development process (as the WID approach might suggest) but that their inclusion may be granted through peripheral positions.

Responding to WAD and WID perspectives, a third major theoretical track emerged agglutinating several feminists who promoted a focus on gender relations as the unit of analysis for understanding the role of women in developmental process. By emphasizing gender relations more than women *per se*, Gender and Development (GAD) scholars embrace a more holistic perspective overcoming the narrow focus on productive (economic) or reproductive (motherhood) aspects of women lives. Instead, they focus "*on the fit between family, household or the domestic life and the organization of both political and economic spheres*" (Young, 2000). Compared with WAD, the focus on gender relations grants more agency to women, who are perceived by this approach as

active agents and not just “passive recipients of development”. In result, notions such as “emancipation”, “organization” and “self consciousness” become extremely important under this approach for the study of women’s participation in development. Also the debate about the role of the State in promoting women’s emancipation is a significant one within this framework, not only as a major employer but also as provider of health, education and training services. Most importantly, while WAD fail to recognize the importance of cross gender alliances for the advancement of women’s rights, GAD scholars reject the idea that “*men act invariably to promote male dominance*” and consider that women can find bases for support “*within families and kinship*” (Young, 2000).

## **Critiques to the Western paradigm**

Encounters between Western and non Western feminists surrounding the ongoing debate about the role of women in development tend to unveil differentiated approaches and strategies, some of which deserve particular attention. The rhetoric of Western feminist groups as expressed in the world conferences celebrated in the 1980s and 1990s emphasize the ideas that: a) sex inequality constitute the main problem faced by women in the Third World, b) patriarchal power takes priority in the analysis of women status (vis a vis other marginalizing forces), c) other analytical categories such as race, class or position in national structures are less important than gender, d) a sisterhood between First World and Third World groups will become an effective tool to advance sex equality (Sen and Grown, 1987), e) women activism and feminist mobilization is an effective tool to promote changes in the sphere of women’s rights.

In relation with the last feature, Western feminism enthusiastically tends to conceive the advancement in women’s rights as the result of mobilization at the base and increasing pressure from below. Among all possible factors, it is the activism of feminist movements what forces the political system to make concessions around women’s rights. In this view, Third World women were frequently seen as lacking sufficient feminist

ideology and appeared to be too aligned to their local establishments and subordinated to the (patriarchal) power of the State (Mazumdar, 1977).

Criticisms to Western feminist theories have come from different theoretical and geographical backgrounds. Diversity in feminist theories in the US has also been paralleled by a prolific production of non Western feminist thought. The multifaceted nature of feminism that has characterized both sides - the developed and developing world- makes difficult any sort of simplification or generalization about coincidences and differences. However, drawing upon the selected work of a group of scholars we have attempted to elicit what we consider are the most significant and compelling present criticisms to Western feminist theory in the field of development. Thus, the rest of our paper will introduce some of these critiques as originally discussed by their authors in the following terms: a) the alternative construction of women as subjects in the Third World feminist literature, as discussed in Saunders (2002), b) the differentiated approach to the State in the strategies of Latin American feminist movement as analyzed by Molyneux (2000), c) the limitations of Western “change from below” paradigm, as discussed in Htun (2003) and Charrad (2001), d) the debates around the notion of sisterhood as stated in Bergeron (2001), e) the colonialist implications of Western feminist as suggested by Moller Olkin (1999) and Aguilar (1995), and f) the need to bring the actor’s perspective back as discussed in Long (2001) , Kandiyoti (2000) and Hoodfar (1997).

### ***A new subject in Third World feminism***

An important difference between western and third world feminism is found in their conceptualization of women as the subject of struggles. While western feminists make equality between men and women the center of their struggles, third world feminism “stressed satisfaction of basic material needs as a pressing issue in the context of disadvantageous international economic order.” (Saunders, 2002, p.6). Here, the situation of women is perceived not only as the result of unequal gender relations, but as the consequence of a wide range of oppressive situations that transcend gender categories and are also related to race, class, and citizenship cleavages.

The perspective of Third World feminism can be reflected in the agenda and desires articulated by a well know network of activists, researchers and policy makers spread across different countries referred to as DAWN – *Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era*. In the view of their members, the principal struggle of Third World women should be centered around the satisfaction of basic needs, understood as basic rights. They believe women should attain freedom not only from gender related inequalities, but also from those related to race, class and national asymmetries, since these categories are mutually intertwined in the concrete and real lives of women. For a vast majority of women in the Third World, injustice as a result of class, race and nationality divisions is closely related to the oppressive situations that they experience as women. (Sen and Grown, 1987).

In consequence, many Third World women activists –such as those nucleated in DAWN– tend to reject the notion of a single and uniform feminist movement, acknowledging the heterogeneity that derives from diverse sources of oppression. In their view, feminism is more widely defined as a struggle against all forms of injustice, also requiring changes across the different fronts in order to attain advancements in women’s rights. However, differences in the ground should not opaque the battle to alter gender subordination which remains –among others– a relevant form of oppression. (Sen and Grown, 1987)

This need to take in to consideration other forms of oppression is a crucial difference when contrasting feminism across western and non Western worlds, one that have important theoretical and practical implications. On the one hand, if woman as subject is conceptualized as the *locus* for many oppressive situations, then the name Women in itself does not account for all sources of exploitation, becoming an obstacle or –at least– a constrain to fight against other forms of oppression. On the other hand, the notion that Western feminism has promoted about a Third World Women as an autonomous and sovereign subject (in its Foucaultian sense) seems to fail when we acknowledge its limitations. As participants in the development process, women are not to be seen as the revolutionary and sovereign actors through which changes should be attained, but as “a

*symptom of the overdetermined effects and resistances to multiple oppressions and exploitative process.*” (Saunders, 2002).

Overall, the enlightened vision of women as a sovereign subject with agency –typical in Western feminism- has great potential to challenge existing inequalities and oppressions in the realm of gender relations. However, as it happens with other centered categories such as the proletariat in Marx, its totalizing parameters may exclude the recognition of other important sources of oppression, limiting the possibilities for justice.

### ***Latin American feminism and the State in Molyneux***

Some of the above mentioned considerations gain clarity and precision in the light of Molyneux’s work about the relationship between women’s movements and the State in Latin American history. Drawing upon recent feminist historiography, Molyneux’s analysis claim that women’s agency played a significant role in Latin America to obtain and advance women’s right in the domain of the state. The emphasis on the contribution of women’s movement, however, needs to acknowledge the favorable contexts and political alliances usually articulated around gains in women’s status. Additionally, the case of Latin America also reflects an equally important and passionate presence of anti feminist activism, though it has not received as much scholar attention as the first one. (Molyneux, 2000)

But even accounting for all changes attained during the twentieth century, Molyneux assesses these concessions as mere “piecemeal, usually minimal” since “*the social organization of power, not only in the state but in much of civil society, retained a predominantly masculine character.*” (Molyneux, 2000, p. 68). In her perspective, no one state in Latin America was able to achieved gender equality in the political sphere, being incapable to dismantle the masculine bias in the organization of society. Though the author is not totally certain about the reasons for the relatively slow advance in

women's rights in Latin America, she provides some explanations that are particularly relevant for our comparative analysis with Western feminist activism.

Unlike feminist movements in the United States and Europe, women's activism in Latin America never fully and enthusiastically embraced "equality feminism". This may be the result of a strong identification of women with their family responsibilities and motherhood as a still essential female role. However, feminists efforts to reconcile motherhood requirements with women's rights and social justice in Latin America, resulted – in Molyneux's analysis- in too much concession to masculine privilege. In many of the case studies discussed later in the book, governmental agencies tend to promote egalitarian approaches to gender relations, while also assuming the role of protecting and defending "family values", reflecting some of the tensions and ambiguities present in the prevailing gender ideology.

Additionally, the analysis of the theoretical developments encompassing these processes shows that the State has not been a relevant object of study for Latin American feminist scholars, as was the case in Europe and the United State. On the other hand, the prolific twentieth century Latin American scholarship about the State more often than not forgot to consider the impact of gender inequities and gender relations in its analysis, something that Molyneux interprets as "a reflection of the normative bias of male-dominated disciplines". However, a turn in the approach seems to be observed with the economic crisis of 1980s which brought gendered analysis to understand the economic impact provoked by the structural adjustments as well as gender implications of some policies to cope with the crisis. Interestingly, several feminist studies claim that the domestic and private sphere –where gender inequalities tend to be constituted- is the result of forces that operate at the interface between state and civil society.

Blending their analysis with other emerging theoretical currents, feminists studies in the 1980s and 1990s begin to identify the power of the state as a key dimension in the reproduction of social relations. Consistently with our comments in the previous section, these approaches embraced a broader interpretation of state power, including not only

gendered formations but also class and racial relations. Finally, the recent waves of citizenship studies have granted specific space for gender analysis, posing the question of “how citizenship can be reformulated to encompass gender difference without at the same time signifying inequality” (p. 36)

Overall, Molyneux claims that the meaning of Latin American feminism has been permanently redefined and contested during the twentieth century. The rights gained by Latin American women need to be seen as the result of conflicts in which “partial, precarious and sometimes unwanted freedoms have been won”, more than advancements towards the “full emancipation” of a sovereign subject.

### ***“Change from below” in Htun and Charrad***

With different arguments, Charrad and Htun challenge Western paradigms for gender policy and proved it inappropriate to explain changes in the countries they surveyed. While Charrad studied the advancements in gender legislation occurred in the Maghrib (Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria) in the post-colonial and State formation periods, Htun’s work discusses the transformations in abortion, divorce and family law during authoritarian and democratic regimes in the Southern Cone of Latin America (Chile, Argentina and Brazil) between 1960s and 1990s.

The comparative research conducted by Charrad, evidence than in North African countries “*pressures from women’s grassroots movements were either absent or ineffective*” (Charrad, 2001, p.240). For the surprise of western feminists, Charrad study shows that “*the government of the country where the most radical reforms occurred [Tunisia] was not the object of pressures from below by an organized women’s movement*” (p. 8). Similarly, Htun argues that were the particular institutional arrangement and settings more than the mobilization of feminists groups what created the opportunities for advancement in women’s right. Furthermore, she speculates that feminist movements in developed nations use to advocate for global and aggregated

agendas (“omnibus”) making difficult the separated treatment of issues and reducing, in consequence, the chances of reform.

Both studies proved that the “change from below” paradigm as conceived by Western feminists relies on the –somewhat weak- assumption of the availability of sufficient resources at the base, which would lead to mobilization and put pressure onto power holders. In this view, the existence of a group of well educated women is a necessary condition for the emergence of leadership roles to channeled demands and take advantage of the opportunities that governing elites may open. However, these conditions did not prove to be universal nor were sufficient causes for explaining gender policy transformation in the countries studied by Htun and Charrad. Still, the authors found that in some cases it was the task of males to promote and impulse changes in women’s rights. To illustrate this point, Htun points out that “a lot of the force behind the change on gender equality [...] came from middle-class male lawyers” (p.15). Similarly, Charrad explains the promulgation of Tunisian Code of Personal Status as a reform promoted by “the leaders of the urban, reformist faction [...] in the absence of a feminist grassroots mass movement”. (p. 214).

In sum, based on different methodological approaches and focusing on different regions of the developing world, Htun and Charrad reinforced the centrality of State as the structure granting women’s rights, in detriment of the marginal role played by activist and social movements. In both cases, political alliances and levels of state autonomy *vis a vis* external entities (whether the Catholic Church as in Htun or kinship groupings as in Charrad) were crucial conditions when explaining the advancement of women’s right.

### ***“Strategic Sisterhood” in Bergeron***

In his analysis of the discourses of globalization in feminist politics Suzanne Bergeron criticized the notion of “strategic sisterhood” as has been developed by Western feminist activists. Reinforced by discourses of globalization, feminist analyses tend to ignore local specificities promoting the strategy of a “global feminism” as a shared voice against a

supposedly unified capitalist world market. Echoing the work of other scholars, Bergeron argues that we need to be aware of these images of “transnational feminism within which varying local interpretations are collapsed into a homogeneous identity of women’s interests against global capitalism” (Bergeron, 2000, p.1000)

The notion of a universal feminist movement to resist the universal forces of gender inequality, is rooted –in Bergeron perspective- in the way in which feminists think about the nature of globalizing capital as supported by a “unified, intentional and noncontradictory economic logic”. In her view, feminists should begin to denaturalize globalizing capitalism and see it as a socially constructed process, imagining a wider range of alternatives to transform and subvert the principles of market economies.

Instead of perceiving economic globalization as a monolithic, dominant and irreversible force, Bergeron suggests to deconstruct this process and examine its complexities and the multiple opportunities that it is sheltering for feminist movements. Her analysis documents several cases in which women’s succeed in organizing themselves in the context of global restructures, providing powerful examples of alternatives strategies at the national and international level. In Tanzania for example, women chose to work in the informal sector rather than multinational corporations, and in Mexico, women used their wages from *maquiladoras* to start women’s center that provided legal assistance. While the cited examples show forms of resistance that seek to transform the material conditions, they also “*have transformed women’s sense of individual and collective identity as well as they renegotiate their places in the household, workplace, and community.*” (p.999).

Women’s resistance strategies need to take into account the complexities underlying the process of economic globalization overcoming the simplistic characterization of weak and undefended States against the powerful and irreducible forces of capital. Instead, the author suggests that women’s strategies should identify and confront the “scattered hegemonies” that may operate at the various levels of “*global economic institutions,*

*nation-states, patriarchal households, and other structures that support exploitation.”*  
(p.1001)

Instead of a homogenous, monolithic and universal feminist movement Bergeron suggests the conformation of a “strategic sisterhood” that recognizes the possibility of multiple feminist identities, strategies and alternative forms of resistances to globalization. By acknowledging the existence of contradicting and heterogeneous subjectivities, feminist movements will enhance their transformative vision, expanding their forms of resistance beyond traditional discourses.

### ***Colonial implications of Western feminism***

A source of criticism to Western feminism has come from feminist scholars in different part of the world that sees its normative prescription as an imposition to local cultural and religious traditions in the name of women rights. As it has been the case in many parts of the world, the expansion of women’s rights may face resistance from various sources, some of which can emanate from cultural and religious norms (though there might be other sources, even more harmful for women rights). As it has occurred in the case of Middle East and North African countries, these resistance forces may appear in the format of rights and entitlements, as they expressed the rights of a given cultural, ethnic or religious community to enforce its norms and values within its members. Thus, the problem is featured as a right’s confrontation between achieving gender equality on the one hand, and respecting cultural and religious traditions on the other.

As Susan Moller Okin (1999) has pointed out, the debate about women’s right versus religious rights is a significant one, with strong arguments and compelling cases on both sides. The international community on “gender and development” (mainly reflecting the preferences of Western feminism) has made clear its emphatic position at the Conference of Beijing in 1995. In this instance, the resolution stated although “ the significance of national religious particularities in various historical, cultural and religious systems must

be kept in mind, it is the duty of states regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems to protect and promote all human rights and fundamental freedom”.

But the defense of universal women’s rights is by no means a consented issue among scholars, not even among feminist theorists in the developing world. Some may argue that “superseding cultural or religious traditions in the name of women’s right is an act of intellectual colonialism which entails an inadmissible intromission” (Moller Okin, 1999). As the critique to Western feminism goes, outsiders and external observers to these realities are not entitled to make judgements about the status of women since they are not able to understand the cultural framework from the actor’s perspective.

In a similar vein, Aguilar’s work (2001) about the evolution of feminist movements in the Philippines warns about the risk that may be derived from uncritically embracing the ideas of Western feminism, which she sees as “a feminist replication of neo-colonialism”. In Aguilar’s perspective, the idea of a universal sisterhood among all feminists of the globe reinforces the colonial standing of national feminist movements. The author sees the emulation of foreign feminism as “the Trojan horse of feminist ethnocentrism” and an international expression of “cultural imperialism.”

Echoing other scholars, she finds that the Western notion of a “universally shared oppression among women” reflects an old-fashioned essentialist theoretical current. However, she believes that Western feminism has become less Eurocentric moving into a more heterogeneous and plural construction of women as a subject. As a result, is that instead of an “essentialized women” we have now more “fragmentary, multiple, contradictory” subjectivities, that reflect other sources of oppression such as “racism, classism, homophobia, ableism.” The problem with this approach, as seen by Aguilar, is that the meaning of “women” is being permanently constructed and reconstructed, making it too contingent to the way in which gender interacts with other categories in a specific situation.

The author believes that this new version of Western feminism leads to a “politics of difference” once, that turns the attention to “the local and specific, the subjective, the personal.” This position implies rejecting the possibility of an overarching framework and the retreat from the political struggle. Instead, she calls for a new version of feminism, one that is defined as “vehemently anti-colonial and staunchly nationalist”, because, as she says, “it is time to reinscribe nationalism into the feminist agenda”.

### ***Bringing the actor’s perspective back***

Though Norman Long’s work (2001) doesn’t refer directly to gender relations, his study of the development projects and the need to bring an actor oriented perspective to the analysis serves as the base of a pertinent critique to more traditional feminist approaches. As a reaction to structural and generic theories of development that Long considered “people-less and obsessed with the conditions, contexts and driving forces of social life”, he promotes an actor oriented perspective that examines the way in which participants in the field are “locked into a series of intertwined battles over resources, meanings and institutional legitimacy and control”. (Long, 2001) Interestingly, this view implies a change in the orthodoxies of development by shifting the balance towards the agency side of actors, in detriment of more structural determinations of social change.

Drawing upon the tools of social constructivism, Long bases his analysis in the cultural production of the actors in the field, paying particular attention to the role of discourse and language, as channels for the negotiation of meanings and representations in every day life. In his own words, the goal of this analysis is to understand “the processes by which specific actors and networks of actors engage with and thus co-produce their own (inter) personal and collective social worlds.” This approach entails a vision of social life as contingent and provisional, a “work in progress that is never completed and therefore not constructed in an ultimate way”.

Long's theoretical propositions serve as suitable background for this last round of feminist critiques by providing the analytical tools to sustain more culturally situated approaches to women's rights. Following a similar trajectory, many feminist scholars have moved beyond the constraints of social structures and have discussed the way in which women negotiate specific meanings within patriarchal structures. A couple of examples will shed light on the usefulness that an actor oriented perspective can bring to the analysis of women's status in the developing world.

Our first example, refers to Kandiyoti's (1999) analysis of patriarchal structures in the Sub-Saharan Africa and the "patriarchal belt" (Middle East, South Asia and East Asia). Beyond generic and undertheorized definitions of patriarchy, Kandiyoti acknowledges the different, concrete forms and meanings that patriarchal structures can assume across specific contexts. She found that women living within the constraints of different patriarchal arrangements encounter room for negotiation and bargain, being able to expand their autonomy and build strategies of resistance. The possibility of a "patriarchal bargain" as the author named it, allows for a "powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts" (Kandiyoti, 1999, p.88). Through compelling examples about the role of women in agricultural labor and marriage in "classic patriarchy", the author supports the idea that women negotiate concessions and benefits by performing a wide range of strategies that range from subtle forms of non cooperation to open resistance.

In Kandiyoti's perspective, a "regression" to female conservatism as a reaction to a crisis in patriarchy, can become an effective strategy to protect and enhance women autonomy "within the internal logic of a given system". The perception of an external observer -just looking for the presence/absence of women's right- may oversee these refined strategies within the system. However, bringing back the actor perspective constitutes a crucial element to assess the direction of changes in women's rights in a specific community.

Another example to illustrate the benefits that an actor perspective can bring to feminist scholarship, can be provided by Hoodfar's analysis about the use of veils among Cairene

women. Hoodfar's study provides a powerful illustration of how local vestiges of patriarchy are not necessarily opposed to the advancement of women's rights. Despite the inequities hidden behind the use of the veil, the author shows the potential that the same tradition may have for closing the gap, and enhancing women's opportunities. For Hoodfar, the use of veil among Cairene women acquire an alternative meaning, one that protects and –paradoxically- increase women control over their own lives. With examples from real Cairene women, Hoodfar proves how the veil can be used as a personal shield to deter male harassment or attached a visible sign of loyalty to traditional values, to dilute the suspect that comes along with an unconventional profession. Although the veil remains a signal of asymmetry in the relationship between sexes, it also provides opportunity to lessen women constraints and limitations in a patriarchal society. Hoodfar claims that in particular contexts, cultural and religious normative traditions that were seen as curtailments of women rights in generic terms, are deprived of its oppressive meaning and become a vehicle for opportunities to accomplish these universal rights.

## **Conclusions**

Our analysis has shown some of the main critiques that have been fired at Western feminism. Though our strategy can be disputed, the case has been made that theoretical production pays tribute to the context where it has been originated, and feminism is not an exception to this rule. Western feminist postulates reflect the trajectory of women's struggles in their search for gender equality and their desire for equal opportunities *vis a vis* men status. In other parts of the world, the advancement of women's rights has followed a distinct route, leading to alternative theorization of the strategies and goals.

Among many possible contrasts, our analysis has emphasized the different ways in which Western and non Western feminisms have conceptualized “women” as the subject of their struggles. The combination of gender asymmetries with other sources of oppression seem to conspire against the essentialism that has been dominating feminist thought in the developed world. Furthermore, some scholars feel the expansion of Western feminist

ideals as impositions that entail new forms of colonialism, emptying the feminist struggle of much of its political contents.

We also found interesting critiques to Western feminist paradigm in the traditions of structural and cultural analysis. For the case of Latin America and the North African countries, we acknowledged the limitations that U.S. feminist theory exhibits when used to explain changes in other contexts, and the need to combine this analysis with more historical and institutional approaches. Complementarily, the cultural analysis brought by an actor's oriented perspective proved to be a powerful instrument to go beyond formal patriarchal structures and examine the spaces for negotiation and maneuvering that women may encounter within those structures. Overall, a combination of both approaches seems to be necessary if we want to account for women's status in terms of, formal rights as consecrated in social structures, and the cultural arrangements, as negotiated by real actors in the field.

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