

The New Competition in Multilateral Norm-Setting: Transnational Feminists & the Illiberal Backlash

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Global norm-setting to advance women's rights has historically been a fertile area for feminist activism. These efforts in multilateral institutions have also, however, attracted a transnationally coordinated backlash. Initially spearheaded by the Vatican, the right-wing backlash has consolidated into a curious coalition that now includes authoritarian and right-wing populist regimes and bridges significant differences of religious belief, regime type, and ideology. Hostility to feminism has proven to be a valuable point of connection between interests that otherwise have little in common. Some tensions between feminist groups have been exploited by right-wing interests, in particular over sex workers' rights and the use of technology to alter the interpretation and experience of sexuality, reproduction, and gender (transgender issues, surrogacy, sex-selective abortion, and sexuality and disability). This essay reviews a recent instance of right-wing coordination, seen in the nearly successful effort to derail the 2019 meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. It examines the strategic responses of transnational feminist movements to this backlash in multilateral institutions, including their exploration of new transnational policy issues and experimentation with hybrid transnational spaces.

Global governance – understood not just as the work of multilateral institutions tackling transborder problems (climate change, migration, weapons of mass destruction) but as a regime of shared norms, such as universal human rights – has been a focus of feminist activism for at least a century. From the efforts of the International Congress of Women in 1915 to end World War I and support what eventually became the League of Nations, to the creation of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 1946, to the inclusion of gender-based violence in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court in 2000, to the centrality of gender equality in the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals, feminist activism has sought to make gender equality a core compo-

ment of global governance. In spite of the marked male dominance of multilateral institutions and disciplines (diplomacy, peace- and war-making, trade), global institutions also constitute a valuable “transnational opportunity structure” for feminist activism using normative and legal strategies to make gender equality norms persuasive in global goal-setting.¹ Global institutions, in turn, have stimulated transnational activism among feminists, providing opportunities for building common cause, providing a focus and location for advocacy (for instance, the UN World Conferences on Women series between 1975 and 1995), providing funding, and creating gender policy machinery that transnational feminists can hold accountable (for instance, UN Women, created in 2010). It is precisely because global institutions have provided a helpful normative and policy terrain for feminist movements that forces hostile to gender equality are seeking to dislodge the feminist foothold in global institutions, a process explored in this essay, which draws upon twenty-one interviews with transnational feminist activists conducted in March and April 2019 (see the methodological note at the end of the essay).

Examples of feminist normative triumphs in multilateral space include the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (and its increasingly progressive general recommendations to update provisions on violence against women, trafficking, reproductive rights, and rights within families), inclusion of conflict-related gender-based violence as war crimes in the 2000 Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court, and the UN Security Council’s ten resolutions on women, peace, and security that bring a gender perspective to global security work.² The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (from the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women) is a progressive manifesto that makes unusual reading for an agreement between UN Member States, proposing structural changes to enable women to participate fully in economic life, support for women’s autonomy in sexual and reproductive decisions, elimination of gender stereotypes in the media, and recognition of the need to overcome attitudinal barriers to women in politics and to men in unpaid care work.

The 1995 Beijing conference was significant for another reason: it was a profoundly productive moment for transnational feminist activism. Two years of preparatory funding from donor governments in advance of the meeting supported significant organizational development in a wide range of women’s groups and networks, which accounted for over thirty thousand participants in the unprecedented NGO Forum (the companion event open to the public) beside the ten thousand state delegates. This intergovernmental process, hard on the heels of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, ended up being generative for feminist civil society around the world by creating an incentive for feminist organizations to professionalize, prioritize, and network transnationally to amplify impact. This effect, however, was strongest in the Global South. According

to a Bangladesh-based interviewee from the Asian Network of Women's Shelters: "We got a lot of funding from OECD countries for Beijing and when we got there we felt sorry for Northern feminists. We discovered they had not been funded that whole time, and grassroots women of the West were left out. From the West it was mainly professional bureaucrats who were represented."³ This funding supported intellectual work in the Global South to generate feminist critiques of neoliberalism and to insist upon attention to the race and class differences overlooked by Western feminists. These conceptual changes challenged the North-South gap in objectives and leadership that had made transnational feminism appear up to that point as the internationalization of American second-wave feminism.⁴

Feminist engagement with international institutions is held up by constructivist international relations theorists as a paradigmatic example of how a relatively power-deprived social group (women and feminists) can challenge the power of sovereign states and recruit them to promote justice. Constructivists Margaret Keck, Kathryn Sikkink, and Martha Finnemore have described how feminist "norm entrepreneurs" have built alliances with friendly states and insider champions ("femocrats"), reaching a "tipping point" after which a "norm cascade" triggers universal commitments to gender equality.⁵

This "cascade" has been interrupted. By the time the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were agreed on in 2015, while gender parity had been reached globally in some areas of health and education, progress remained stubbornly slow on women's political participation (still on average less than 25 percent of legislatures) and had started to reverse on women's labor force participation (dropping in most contexts after 2005 from high points above 50 percent).⁶ The SDGs include a stand-alone goal on gender equality as well as gender-specific targets across many of the other goals. But, signaling a shift in the international environment for women's rights, states could not agree on targets for encouraging men's involvement in domestic care work (SDG target 5.4), or for state responsibilities to use social policy to mitigate the costs borne by women for childbearing and -rearing (such as displacement from career ladders and discontinued pension contributions, SDG target 1.3). In both of these areas, feminist activism seems to have hit a wall: states cannot agree on their responsibility to change social norms and are therefore asked only to make efforts "as nationally appropriate."⁷ In the area of reproductive rights, the 2015 SDGs were forced to retreat to decades-old language that had been agreed on at the Cairo conference on population and development (SDG target 5.6).⁸

The cascade of global gender equality norms generated some cautious triumph among feminist observers in the period between 1995 and the end of the post-Cold War honeymoon around 2008. Feminist organizations working with a growing number of feminist policy-makers (femocrats) inside

states and multilateral institutions were forming increasingly effective “transnational advocacy networks” or “velvet triangles” of insider-outsider policy change champions.⁹ Writing in 2006, political scientist Aili Mari Tripp noted, “In the past two decades we have witnessed the evolution of an international consensus around particular norms regarding women’s rights” that has made a range of international institutions “intent on changing women’s status and removing key impediments to women’s advancement in almost every arena.”¹⁰ Reflecting on the creation of UN Women in 2010, which merged four marginal UN entities and elevated its new executive director to the same rank as leaders of other UN agencies, international relations and gender scholars Gulay Çağlar, Elisabeth Prugl, and Susanne Zwingel wrote: “Together, the UN and feminist activists have formed a unique apparatus of international governance that has made possible remarkable changes in gender regimes.”¹¹

This gender mainstreaming apparatus (of which UN Women is one expression) is not without its critics. Legal scholar Janet Halley has derided it as establishment-based “governance feminism.”¹² Her critique implies that not only does institutionalized feminism legitimate some of the global systems that create oppression (neoliberal growth strategies, militarization), but it risks reproducing some patriarchal gender and cultural essentialisms. Legal scholar Ratna Kapur has argued that this happens through the constant effort to make feminist objectives intelligible to policy-makers either by instrumentalizing women as useful to every policy objective, from poverty reduction to counterterrorism, or by focusing on women as victims, in what she labels “subordination feminism.”¹³ According to Halley: “Merging into the mainstream can efface the feminist fingerprints on important governance projects and preclude intrafeminist arguments about them. . . . It can respond to more general discursive or strategic demands making victimization and identity the prerequisites for legal intelligibility.”¹⁴ This means femocrats in international governance are either essentializing dupes or are corrupted by the “seductions of power,” drawn in particular to narrowing the focus of the gender equality project to those born anatomically female, and to what Halley has called the “siren call of victimization”: focusing on how women are objects of male venality. Some argue this depoliticizes the feminist project by converting public policy into a rescue mission for abused women that constructs a simplistic dichotomy between “progressive” Western liberal values and “barbaric” cultures in the Global South, and that misperceives or ignores women’s agency and intentions in practices such as sex work or veiling. This reductive victim focus is enormously productive for fundraising.¹⁵ However, it may contribute to the sluggish progress on feminist policy objectives to build women’s rights and participate in competitions for power, such as in the labor market and in politics.

The risks of co-optation and the impetus toward instrumental reduction inherent to most efforts to institutionalize women’s rights have long been obvious to

feminist activists who engage with international institutions, some of whom have maintained a productive insider-outsider tension to keep gender equality policy from deviating into paternalistic approaches. After the 1995 Beijing conference, there was a drift in feminist transnational activism away from UN-related activism and toward independent arenas such as the World Social Forum or regional, national, and local work.¹⁶ In part, this was because of frustration about the sidelining of the Beijing Platform for Action in international policy-making, which shifted wholesale to the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) framework just a few years later. Unlike the Beijing Platform for Action, the MDGs lack a critique of neoliberal growth strategies and were designed without consultation with transnational feminist groups. From a women's rights perspective, they were seen as reductive. Girls' participation in primary school was the only target to measure the gender equality goal (MDG 3), and the only direct goal for adult women (MDG 5) was focused on maternal mortality. Nationally, competition to perform well on the simple eight-point MDGs sidelined implementation of the complex and culturally challenging Beijing Platform for Action.

The partial retreat from multilateralism also stemmed from difficulties in connecting global developments to domestic challenges: as the U.S. activist Charlotte Bunch has pointed out, in the United States during this period, "there [was] a tendency not to see the international arena as adding anything to causes at home," unlike earlier suffrage movements and peace efforts that saw advances in other countries as likely to spur the same in the United States.¹⁷ The United States is of course a special case, since its nonratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the disdain of periodic Republican administrations for multilateralism means that the "boomerang" effect described by Keck and Sikkink, in which transnational norms can be used to advance domestic equality agendas, has not been deployed.¹⁸

In part, the retreat from multilateralism also stems from a significant drop in financing for autonomous feminist mobilization by official bilateral and multilateral aid donors after Beijing. A decade-long monitoring process conducted by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) shows that after the Beijing moment, funding for autonomous feminist mobilization shrank dramatically and remains a problem today. While 2019 saw significant new gender equality commitments by governments and private foundations (such as the Gates Foundation's commitment of \$1 billion over ten years), so far only 1 percent of these new funds are committed to organizational strengthening of feminist associations.¹⁹ In regular OECD bilateral aid, about 4 percent (\$4.5 billion) has the promotion of gender equality as its principal objective, of which less than 10 percent supports women's organizations, with only a fraction of that amount dedicated to operational costs.²⁰

The Beijing high point for transnational feminism was also linked with the debut of a visceral conservative countermovement, triggered in particular by feminist theorizing about the distinctions between “sex” and “gender” (and the implication that gender identity and sexual orientation are social constructions), as well as by advances in recognition of women’s sexual and reproductive autonomy achieved in Cairo in 1994 and the decisive subjection of domestic gender-based violence to the principles of criminal law and justice in Vienna in 1993.²¹

While the Holy See initiated the backlash effort to discredit feminist thinking in multilateral forums – using its observer status at the UN – what is striking is the size and diversity of the antifeminist movement this fostered.²² As early as the Cairo conference on population and development, the Vatican experimented with unconventional alliances to support this agenda, courting Libya and Iran to object to assertions of women’s autonomy in making reproductive decisions.²³ The antifeminist movement has since become a core component of a very broad reaction against liberal norms that spans opposition to issues ranging from the tolerance of same-sex relationships, to prohibitions on torture, to affirmative action, to gun control. This illiberalism, according to analysts of the global right wing, unites normative and epistemic communities that are in fact usually antagonistic to each other. They tend to enjoy an advocacy advantage since they defend what are seen as familiar and accepted traditional social virtues.²⁴ As an interviewee from AWID noted: “The narrative strength is on the right. Even progressive states won’t challenge the idea of family values.”²⁵ Hostility to feminism, to feminist organizations, and to feminist women leaders seems to perform a useful bonding function between right-wing and authoritarian interests with otherwise next to nothing in common.

The antigender campaign has targeted the UN since the 1990s – particularly the Commission on the Status of Women, which initiated all four World Conferences on Women, and the Commission on Population and Development – but the feminist leaders interviewed for this essay note an intensification of efforts, a diversification of conservative alliances, and an increasing impact since 2012. That year saw illiberal forces score a significant “spoil” when they prevented the production of “agreed conclusions” at the fifty-ninth meeting of the CSW. A small group of conservative (mainly North African and Middle Eastern) states, marshalled by the Russian delegation to the CSW, blocked consensus because of a refusal to accept the notion of “comprehensive sexuality education,” caricatured as promoting promiscuity and homosexuality in adolescents.

That same year, feminist activists, according to a member of the European Women’s Lobby I interviewed, became aware that the Holy See had quietly been sponsoring pre-CSW retreats in spas in Arizona for members of UN missions considered to be amenable to their position – smaller African countries in particular. Consistency in language and negotiating strategies is ensured through use of

a ninety-page guide to recommended conservative positions on family-related matters in UN negotiations. This manual, which covers more than eighty topics from abortion to youth sexuality, is updated annually by the conservative NGO Family Watch International.²⁶ According to an interviewee from AWID, the Alliance Defending Freedom, identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a hate group because of its anti-LGBT positions, also provides documentation and training to support conservative positions on international law.²⁷ It was also after this point (in 2012), according to a European Women's Lobby member from Turkey, that important countries (Turkey, Egypt) started to eliminate feminist civil society participants from their CSW delegations.²⁸

Shortly after the impasse at the CSW in 2012, Ban Ki-moon, then UN secretary-general, asked the General Assembly if it would like to see a Fifth World Conference in 2015. The rancor of the preceding CSW debates contributed to the conviction of UN Women and feminist activists that a multilateral Fifth World Conference on women would trigger a catastrophic erosion of women's rights. The proposal to hold a Fifth World Conference quietly evaporated.

Capture of state power by conservative, often religious fundamentalist groups has amplified their power enormously. The "illiberal drift" – democratic swings in favor of right-wing populists – has caught many democracy analysts off-guard, and its extent is significant, with most of the world's most populous nations now under right-wing and sometimes authoritarian government control, and Freedom House counting the erosion of civil and political rights for thirteen straight years.²⁹

The Trump administration in the United States has brought a surprising boost to antifeminist voices in multilateral forums. Evangelical Christians have been appointed to some pivotal roles relevant to gender equality in the State Department, USAID, and Health and Human Services, where they have embarked on dismantling women's health and rights programs domestically and internationally as well, starting with the reinstatement and strengthening – on Trump's first day in office – of the global gag rule cutting funding for family planning services.³⁰ While a revival of the global gag rule had been expected, more surprising have been efforts to eliminate references to reproductive health services of any kind for women (for instance in an April 2019 Security Council resolution on support for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence), the promotion of abstinence instead of contraception, and attempts to eliminate the use of the word "gender" in UN documents.³¹

Antifeminists collaborate at the UN to oppose the use of feminist language in official documents, in particular opposing abortion and the free expression of nonheterosexual and nonbinary versions of sexual orientation and gender identity. There has been an increase in pressure to insert terms like "natural" and "fundamental" to describe "the family," and to celebrate women's roles and respon-

sibilities as mothers. Since 2015, a “Group of the Friends of the Family” (GoFF) has cooperated on this agenda. Depending on who is counting, this is a group of twenty-five countries (according to the GoFF website) or 112 (according to one anti-abortion website).³² The group is a mix of countries with Muslim-dominant populations (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Iran, Iraq), former Soviet countries (Belarus and the Russian Federation itself), several prominent African countries (Uganda, Sudan, Zimbabwe), very populous democracies (Nigeria, Indonesia, Bangladesh), and one Catholic-dominant country (Nicaragua). The Holy See is a consistent if informal presence. These are the countries that successfully coordinated, in the process mentioned earlier, to obstruct progressive targets on men’s engagement in unpaid care and on social protection in the SDG framework.³³

In response to these well-coordinated multilateral norm-spoiling efforts, transnational feminists are rebooting their UN advocacy. This has involved shifts in focus and tactics. Lobbying formerly friendly states – the United States, Brazil, the Philippines, even Turkey – is no longer an option in efforts to gain ground on substantive issues in UN negotiating documents. The “usual suspects” – Australia and New Zealand, the Nordic countries, Mexico, many of the EU states, and the EU bureaucracy itself – continue to be supportive, particularly those practicing “feminist foreign policy.”³⁴ But the credibility of feminist advocacy now relies on emerging (but not very powerful) feminist champions: Liberia, Namibia, Cape Verde, Tunisia and Lebanon, Uruguay. These advocates are important because their support contradicts the frequent charge that feminist policy ambitions are a Western women’s project.

Transnational feminists are facing extremely effective tactics by well-funded opponents. These include forum-shopping to set up antifeminist positions in policy debates underpopulated by feminist activists (discussed below), closing down access for civil society in multilateral forums, exploiting schisms in the feminist movement, parading “defectors” to demoralize opponents, and social media attacks. Some of these tactics were deployed to generate chaos and a near failure to reach agreement in the March 2019 CSW.

The forty-five members of the CSW produce an annual consensus outcome intended to guide policy at the national level. Social protection – pensions, social security, cash transfers – was the topic of the 2019 CSW.³⁵ Social conservatives tend to reject feminist demands on states to promote gender equality, which include efforts to encourage men to do care work (such as through paternity leave) or giving women survival alternatives to dependence on individual men (social security, pensions). Market fundamentalists have other concerns, mainly about the costs to taxpayers of universal pensions or universal basic income. They also prefer to minimize state responsibilities to step in when private income support systems fail. The 2019 CSW topic, therefore, invited a convergence between religious

and market fundamentalisms to reject the gender and class redistributive potential of social protection.

The original concise negotiating draft of policy conclusions – the six-page “zero draft” – was subject to so many textual inserts and nonnegotiable “red lines” in the March 2019 negotiations that it expanded to one hundred pages. This textual bloating happens every year, but UN Women insiders said they had never seen such extended or aggressive edits, and observed a coordinated strategy of creating chaos to make negotiating agreed text next to impossible in the two-week time frame.³⁶ Beyond objections to proposals for gender-equal social protection systems, the United States joined Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Malaysia, and the Russian Federation to demand removal of fairly standard provisions such as the use of the word “gender,” a reaffirmation of the Beijing Platform for Action, and references to sexual health and reproductive rights, to comprehensive adolescent sexuality education, and to portable social security benefits on migration.

The facilitator of the negotiations, Kenyan Ambassador Koki Muli Grignon, generated a compromise document at the end of the negotiations that did not jettison previously agreed commitments to sexual and reproductive health services and to comprehensive sexuality education for adolescents. On the final night of the CSW (March 23), Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, members of the Commission, registered a refusal to join consensus. Their identically worded statements listed the core elements of women’s rights to which they objected:

Specifically, multiple references to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights. Promotion of sexual rights and related issues that had never garnered consensus. Refusal to recognize parental rights language. Refusal to recognize the family as the natural and fundamental group unit of society. Failure to fully reflect the role of the family in protecting women and girls. Promotion of sexuality education to children, despite its irrelevance to the theme. Focus on ambiguous terms, such as multiple and intersecting discrimination. Lack of language on national sovereignty. Lack of balance on addressing the issues of violence. Overall issues of transparency and failure to give sufficient time to controversial issues.³⁷

However, this repudiation of so many aspects of women’s rights was delivered at the wrong point in the negotiations, not at the point when the chair called for objections, which meant that Saudi Arabia and Bahrain failed to block the agreement, and so the agreed conclusions document was adopted. This procedural “save” meant that previously agreed normative language was preserved for another year, but it was a close call and the mistake will not be repeated. At the meeting, the United States’ final statement included rejection of past agreements at the UN on sexual and reproductive health and rights because of connotations of abortion.³⁸ When the U.S. representative reminded the assembly that the United States would be a member of the Commission in 2020, it sounded like a threat.

For transnational feminist activists, the CSW has now become a space in which women's rights are vulnerable to reversals. According to an activist in the transnational gay rights organization ARC International, "The outcome of CSW is almost a joke. It lags far behind other parts of the UN like the Human Rights Council (HRC) and even the General Assembly, which have stronger language and go much further than the CSW agreed conclusions."³⁹ An AWID activist noted the dilemma for feminists: "CSW is important for AWID and other organizations. It is a huge space and important annual forum for women's rights groups to come and lobby. But we have no scope for strategic asks."⁴⁰ An activist with OutRight International, a gay rights organization, explained: "We keep our expectations realistic. We don't try to push the envelope – there has never been inclusion of language on sexual orientation and gender identity in the agreed conclusions. We just try to encourage states to remove rigid gender binary language where we can."⁴¹ The conclusion reached by another AWID activist shows that conservatives have de facto repurposed the Commission: "The CSW is probably one of the most regressive spaces at the UN."⁴²

Outside the closed negotiations, conservative civil society groups were aggressively visible. A large blacked-out bus painted with fetuses pleading for their lives, funded by the Spain-based extremist group Citizen Go, patrolled the streets. The Holy See and conservative NGOs hosted side events with titles like: "Surrogacy: A Fresh Look at Women's Bodily Autonomy and the Rights of Children," "Biology Is Not Bigotry," and "Protecting Femininity and Human Dignity in Women's Empowerment." A number of panels boasted "defectors" – a former editor from *Cosmopolitan* magazine regretting connections made years ago between the feminist and sexual revolutions, a lesbian former staff member of a family planning clinic, and a victim of gender-based violence – all emphatically opposed to recognizing trans women as women. Menacingly, the chief facilitator was subject to a cyber assault during negotiations, her email account bombarded with hundreds of antichoice messages. Citizen Go eventually took responsibility for this.

These events demonstrated a capacity for creative adaptation of feminist discourse: for instance, praising the value of women's care work (but not seeking to redistribute it to men), or condemning the harm created by overly rigid gender stereotypes (but rejecting individuals who transition genders), or condemning the exploitation of poor women in surrogacy contracts (but not supporting their capacity to shape such contracts). In several areas, conservative groups have exploited important schisms between feminists. The Heritage Foundation, for instance, has exploited the unease expressed by some feminists about the transgender movement and has built alliances with activists labeled TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists).⁴³ They have also made inroads with feminists with reservations on abortion issues, particularly where the pro-choice position has led to sex-selective abortion, or to abortion linked to potentially eugenic purposes, such as to eliminate fetuses deemed imperfect. This is a matter of enormous concern to disabled people.

The tumult and the uncomfortable outcome in the 2019 CSW was not unexpected, but has spurred urgent discussion on whether and how to exploit the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing World Conference on Women to renew global solidarities, refresh the membership of global women's movements, address deep divisions, and challenge the conservative backlash. A number of activists suggested that the sense of attacks on all fronts has forced them into a reactive mode. As a leader of CREA, a South Asian feminist organization, put it: "Strategic conversations are not happening because we are responding day to day to attacks. We don't have the resources or the security to do the same strategic thinking that the opposition is doing. We are being fractured. . . . They can see we are a divided house."⁴⁴ Transnational feminist organizations have been investing in strategic pushback. These efforts, discussed in turn below, include exploiting the full range of transnational spaces, inserting feminist conversations into new human rights discussions, critical engagement with UN Women to support resolution of differences between feminists, and monitoring the membership and financing of conservative groups.

Transnational feminists have successfully demanded space for gender equality issues in multilateral institutions that lack a gender mandate. An important example is the pursuit of the Women Peace and Security agenda since 2000 in the UN Security Council.⁴⁵ Successful feminist interventions have also been made at the International Criminal Court and the UN's International Law Commission. Feminist advocacy, for instance, influenced the new June 2019 draft Convention on Crimes against Humanity, which uses an updated definition of gender that prohibits persecution on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation, and identifies prohibitions on abortion as violating women's rights to life, health, and freedom from torture.⁴⁶ Like conservatives, feminists are exploiting every possible part of transnational space to make advances when they are blocked elsewhere.

The Human Rights Council, established in 2005, has become a vital focus. It has more meaningful structured access for civil society groups than any other part of the UN, with formal procedures for receiving civil society position papers. It meets in at least three annual regular sessions, providing frequent opportunities for activists to counter conservative mobilization on a wide range of topics, most notably the continuous efforts by Russia and allies to generate resolutions to protect traditional families. Its "universal periodic review" mechanism has since 2006 provided a new opportunity for critical civil society commentary on national deficits in women's rights. Finally, because the HRC takes decisions on the basis of votes and not consensus, it has been able to support the creation of special mandate positions even against conservative opposition, such as, in 2016, appointing an independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

The twenty-three-member CEDAW committee has always been a focus for civil society activism, and the multiplication of general recommendations that expand the remit of the original treaty have provided useful entry points for addressing significant differences between feminists. A general recommendation on trafficking under negotiation in June 2019, for instance, provided for agreement about the need to defend the human rights of sex workers, in spite of differences between abolitionists who seek to outlaw sex work and those who seek legal protections for sex work. According to interviewees, the Sex-Worker Inclusive Feminist Alliance has found a more receptive environment in the CEDAW committee and the HRC than in the CSW. On the issue of sex workers' rights, an activist with the Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development cautioned: "There is a risk that we can intersect with the ultra-right when our thinking stresses protection, victimhood, and minimizes women's agency."⁴⁷ Awareness of this risk is growing among abolitionists. A member of the European Women's Lobby, which supports the Swedish model (criminalization of sex workers' clients), noted: "We are not going to get anywhere if we cannot find a compromise [with sex workers' rights groups]. I wish they would drop the word 'work.' We cannot budge on our position, but we all know this is not working."⁴⁸

Feminist successes in all of these forums have been supported by formal access opportunities for civil society input and the use of technical discourses (particularly legal argumentation) to support goals. Feminist advocacy has also benefited from the fact that these forums permit lobbying with a subset of member states (such as the limited membership of the HRC and, in particular, the Security Council), which allows for fostering alliances among them, as well as shaming and isolating resisters.

Both conservative groups and transnational feminists are adept at forum-shopping to seize advantage, and transnational feminists have learned to leave no vacuums in their monitoring of rights developments. A valuable source of intelligence on the "globalization of anti-gender campaigns" is analysis of funding patterns flowing from conservative Christian and Muslim interests and individuals to support misogynist projects.⁴⁹ The online liberal journal *Open Democracy* has tracked the "dark money" flowing from individuals and organizations in the United States to support the campaigns of populists in Europe and to support European initiatives to defend the traditional family.⁵⁰ A number of the transnational feminist organizations interviewed for this essay have joined forces to track the backlash, contrasting the mounting funding for conservative anti-abortion and pro-family groups with the cuts to funding for women's rights-based providers of family planning. AWID in particular has updated its important ten-year study of funding for women's organizations – "Where is the Money for Women's Rights?" – to collaborate with *Open Democracy* and the global abortion

rights advocate Ipas to improve forensic accounting techniques to track funding of antifeminist initiatives.⁵¹

Two new arenas in which feminists have engaged to combat conservative activists are disability rights and indigenous rights. Both pose important challenges for feminists. Feminists have faced troubling implications of their positions on abortion rights when abortion has been used sex-selectively, or for aborting disabled fetuses. CREA has engaged closely with the annual Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. A CREA activist notes: “Prenatal testing, technologies that enable us to see the fetus as so present and real... the right have used these to attack us.... The bulk of the disability movement is antichoice.” Unlike the right, however, CREA has engaged with disabled women on the question of their sexual and reproductive health and rights, and in October 2018 produced, in partnership with the International Campaign for Women’s Right to Safe Abortion, the “Nairobi Principles” recognizing the agency of disabled women in making sexual and reproductive choices.⁵²

Indigenous women’s rights are another area of conservative mobilization. This raises challenges for feminists because the emphasis on the rights of collectivities over individuals undercuts a powerful feminist tactic of insisting on women’s equal rights as individuals. Collective rights framings have been used by conservative groups at the HRC to defend culture and traditional values in ways that can subordinate women’s rights to the traditional family. In response, connections between transnational feminists and indigenous rights leaders have formed around global campaigns to protect women human rights defenders, including those, like indigenous activists, protesting the environmental damage caused by extractive industries.

Engagement on these issues is difficult but strategic because it denies conservatives opportunities to gain ground on issues that are off many feminists’ radar. Reflecting on her experience at the UN’s annual meeting on disability, the CREA activist observed: “We were one of the only feminist organizations there. There had been zero conversation up to then about disabled women’s sexuality. It was a highly male-dominated space. That is solidarity-building. That is alliance-building in the face of the right-wing co-optation of the disability movement.”⁵³

One of the biggest constraints on this type of strategic engagement on new issues is a lack of funding for feminist organizations to address and even mediate their differences. All the Global South-based transnational advocates I interviewed mentioned the significance of specific funding initiatives such as the Netherlands’ €77 million MDG 3 fund launched in 2008, at the time the largest single fund available to support strategic planning and networking between feminist organizations. Subsequent initiatives such as the 2016–2020 Dialogue and Dissent funding window and the related “Count Me In!” series of coalition-building strategic encounters are intended to enable feminists to address their differences on the issues used by conservatives to divide them.

UN Women is well-positioned as a transnational institutional mechanism to advance women's rights. Feminist civil society groups had advocated for its creation for years, such as through the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) campaign, and upon their success, an advisory group composed mainly of GEAR members was formed to support UN Women's work. This is not, however, an independent observatory or monitoring group, nor is it a governing body. Like all UN entities, UN Women is accountable to an executive board made up of member states: indeed, it has one of the largest executive boards of any UN agency, with forty-one members, currently including Saudi Arabia. According to a member of AWID, "UN Women is very compromised. Antirights groups are laser-focused, unrelenting, and their approach includes pushing states to threaten, constrain or defund UN Women – above all, the states on UN Women's executive board."⁵⁴

Civil society observers are concerned about UN Women's caution on some of the hot-button issues within feminism, a caution partly explained by the constraints of its executive board and the interests of its funders. The dilemmas are clear on the issue of sex work. UN Women, for instance, has officially followed the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, World Health Organization, and International Labour Organization position that all consensual adult sex must be decriminalized as a means of combatting the marginalization of sex workers. But it suddenly declared itself neutral on the matter on receipt of a petition signed by 1,400 sex work abolitionists in mid-November 2019.⁵⁵ The fact that Sweden provides significant financial and diplomatic support for UN Women, and that Sweden is also promoting an abolition of sex work through the criminalization of clients of sex, may, critics worry, compromise the organization. While feminist groups are divided on the issue, a global survey of activists conducted in 2016, by the then head of policy at UN Women, Purna Sen, showed that a majority of respondents supported the full decriminalization of sex work.⁵⁶

A quarter-century has passed since the transformative Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. UN Women announced in March 2019 its intention to convene a global meeting on women's rights in 2020, but said that this would center on women's rights organizations, not states. This intention is animated by the conviction that the only sustained driver of progress on women's rights historically has been women's autonomous organizing. UN Women's intention is to provide feminist activists with a global platform. Mexico and France will, with UN Women, cohost what they have labeled "Generation Equality" forums (in May and July 2020, respectively), but these will not be multilateral negotiations to build on the 1995 Platform for Action. Consensus holds that this remains too precarious a moment for normative debate. What then could a global convening add that transnational feminists are not already accomplishing? The

June 2019 Women Deliver conference in Vancouver attracted some nine thousand attendees and spurred the commitment of \$650 million CAD by the Canadian government and private donors to support gender equality. In October 2020, AWID will hold one of its huge triennial global meetings. Massive global feminist gatherings take place without multilateral engagement, raising questions about the value-added of the “Generation Equality” events.

UN Women, France, and Mexico propose to use this global process to identify serious remaining gaps in the achievement of women’s rights and to form “action coalitions” with funding and five-year programs to close these gaps. These coalitions will build on the comparative advantage of specific private-sector actors, civil society organizations, state and multilateral institutions, and even private individuals such as celebrities to mobilize funds to address stubborn gap areas such as the gendered digital divide, or climate action, or the impact of corruption and tax evasion on resources for gender equality.

Behind these proposals is an acknowledgment of the extent of polarization globally on women’s rights. UN Women clearly feels it cannot rely on a liberal consensus between nations to advance state responsibilities to promote gender equality. The call for engagement of the private sector and even prominent individuals implies a shift in the understanding of the mechanics of policy change and in the power and cultural roles of state authorities. Global corporations and wealthy individuals command more resources than some states. Celebrities can recommend actions to fan bases that are bigger than some countries’ populations.

The “action coalition” proposal is an alternative to the paralysis in multilateral negotiations, but it has generated unease. According to an activist from Just Associates, which supports women human rights defenders: “There is pressure to work with companies, private foundations. These are nontransparent, nonaccountable actors with objectives very different from ours. If we find member states to be fickle partners, what can we expect from private actors?” However, she acknowledged that building alliances with unconventional partners is essential: “We’ve been cut off at the knees because we have been preaching to the choir. . . . We need to forge new relationships with actors that can push strategic issues.”⁵⁷

In the face of a ferocious backlash and the rapid reinstatement and acceptance of patriarchal norms in some states and communities, transnational feminists are confronting the issues that divide them more openly than ever before. Whether a global convening in 2020 can hold back this reactionary tide depends on the extent to which transnational feminists engage with it and the extent to which systems are developed to ensure that “action coalitions” are held accountable for meeting gender equality goals. As a representative of FEMNET (the African Women’s Development and Communication Network) argued: “Celebrating gains when space has shrunk for autonomous organizing is perverse and problematic. We cannot have bureaucratic elites in the UN or member states decide on

priorities. . . . We know the trends, we know what to fight for, what is strategic. When so many other forces are limiting us, we cannot be limited by UN Women.”⁵⁸

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This essay is based on twenty-one interviews I conducted in March–April 2019 with activists from transnational feminist organizations. Most are members of even larger caucuses with a degree of institutional access to the deliberations of multilateral institutions, such as the Women’s Major Group, first created at the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 and currently monitoring implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (2012–2015); the Women’s Rights Caucus, a global coalition of over 250 organizations with shared positions on the debates of the UN Commission on the Status of Women and the Human Rights Council; and the EU-focused European Women’s Lobby, comprising seventeen European women’s rights coalitions.⁵⁹ This was a purposive but not comprehensive selection, based on the availability of interviewees who were attending the March 2019 meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York. The interviews were conducted on a nonattribution basis.

Interviewees were from the following organizations: Amnesty International; ARC International; Asian Network of Women’s Shelters; Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development; Association for Women’s Rights in Development; CREA; CSW NGO Forum; Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era; Diverse Voices and Action for Gender Equality; European Women’s Lobby; FEMNET; Just Associates; International Women’s Health Coalition; Mesoamerican Initiative of Human Rights Defenders; and OutRight Action International.

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