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## Gender politics

## Personal politics

In 1997 Pam Benton, whose partner I had been for twenty-nine years, died of breast cancer. Breast cancer is almost entirely a women's disease. The medical specialists who treat it, however, are mostly men – as medical specialists mostly are in Australia. And they, naturally enough, have many of the attitudes and styles of interaction that men in the professions are likely to have.

Early in the treatment, Pam was referred to a prominent Sydney oncologist. Oncology is specialization in cancer, especially in its treatment through chemotherapy, the use of toxic drugs. This gentleman delivered himself of the opinion that if women would use their breasts for what they were intended for, they would not have so much trouble. Pam was furious, and did not consult him again.

There is, as the oncologist well knew, research evidence that rates of breast cancer are lower in women who have had babies early in life and have breast-fed. That is, so to speak, impersonal fact. (Though even with impersonal fact one may ask why researchers should have been concerned with that particular question rather than studying, say, cancer-causing chemicals in the environment.) The research finding was made into a gender insult – which the oncologist probably did not even realize was offensive – by his bland presumption that what women are 'for' is bearing babies. To him, if they had a different pattern of life, they were asking for what they got.

I tell this story not to attack doctors – I could tell of another senior medical man involved in Pam's treatment who was a model of thoughtfulness and care – but to emphasize how intimate and unavoidable gender politics is.

Some issues about power and inequality are mundane, such as who does the dishes, who puts out the garbage and who writes the shopping list. Some are life-and-death, such as how childbirth and cancer treatment are done. Pam had been an activist in the women's movement over twenty years. We had been through the politics of dishwashing, among other things. She could see the gender politics in cancer medicine, and was not willing to be put down again.

The first tumour, which Pam discovered through routine screening, was so advanced that it required a mastectomy, surgical removal of the whole breast. This is a frightening (though not in itself life-threatening) operation which leaves a long scar where the breast had been. Recovering from the operation, Pam made contact with the support services available to mastectomy patients. It turned out that the main services provided were: supply of an artificial breast, in the appropriate size to replace the one that was lost; visits from women who came to give grooming and dress advice so that the patient could present a normal, attractive feminine appearance to the world; and advice on how to restore family normality, overcome a husband's (expected) sexual disgust at a mutilated body, and deal with children's anxiety about their mother's being taken away from them.

This, too, is political. It is about placing women back in the culture of heterosexual femininity. It is about denying that normality has been rent. It is about holding women responsible for other people's emotional needs. And – not least – it is about restoring normal services to men.

But this politics operates at so deep a level of emotion that it is hardly perceptible as politics unless one is already aware of gender issues. Many women dedicate their lives to making a family and seeing it through the life-cycle. A sense of having an attractive or at least presentable body is an important part of Australian culture's construction of womanhood. Women who are shocked by a major operation, and terrified by discovering they have a deadly disease, are unlikely to revolt against stereotyping, especially when it is presented to them as a form of care by other women.

Gender politics almost always has this dimension of intimacy, as well as involving larger social relations. That is one reason gender change can be so threatening, to many women as well as to many men. Impending changes can upset not only impersonal cultural or institutional arrangements. They also, at the same time and inseparably, upset

people's cherished images of themselves, assumptions about personal relationships, their social embodiment and habits of everyday conduct.

Pam's experience was very close, for me; but the personal politics of gender is found everywhere, so I will give some examples from other parts of the world. One comes from Costa Rica in central America, and is narrated by Susan Mannon (2006). Costa Rica is a banana and coffee exporter, vulnerable to price fluctuations; the Latin American debt crisis of the 1980s drove the country into a neoliberal restructuring, in which many men became unemployed. Mannon interviewed middle-aged married people in an urban area, and tells particularly about one couple, called Cecilia and Antonio, who had lived through these events.

Their household had been set up on a breadwinner/housewife basis, though this was an anxious position as Antonio was an unskilled public sector worker. This gender division was not forced on Cecilia, she was an active participant in creating demarcations between family roles. Economic need drove change; as inflation gripped, Cecilia, like other married women, returned to the money economy. She did this at first by renting out a room in their house – in effect, commodifying her domestic work. In the 1990s the sharp breadwinner/housewife division began to blur – by Cecilia expanding her labour, not Antonio, who did not help around the house. He held on to authority in the family, with support from patriarchal norms in the society around; Cecilia did not use her new economic strength in bargaining with him. Too serious a challenge might have disrupted the social position of respectability that she was actually trying to protect. Patience and love won out.

In the Indian province of Andhra Pradesh there is a relatively high prevalence of HIV. This was recognized in the early 2000s and various public health initiatives have followed. A vigorous organizing project among local sex workers is Project Parivartan. Most are women who come from working-class, lower-caste positions who are marginal in society; gender inequalities are deeply entrenched and sex work itself is stigmatizing. The power differentials, therefore, are steep. This is reflected inside the sex trade, where it is usually the privilege of male clients to decide whether or not to use a condom.

A project report (George and Blankenship 2007) relates experiences of activists in Parivartan when trying to protect themselves from the epidemic by insisting on condom use. In one case, when a customer had solicited the worker on the street and paid in advance, she took him to a rented room, where he refused to use a condom. A dispute arose about the money; the customer eventually 'threatened to shout and wake the neighbours, and put the house owner to shame'. The threat was effective, because this would reveal the woman's sex work and disrupt the arrange-

ments under which she earned her living. Even so elementary a change as introducing condom use involves struggle.

Chapter 2 described changes in conceptions of gender in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. Anna Temkina (2008) reports a life-history study with middle-class women in St Petersburg that takes the story one step further. Different sexual 'scripts' can be distinguished in their stories. The women who had grown up in the Soviet period had lives organized by marriage, usually placed themselves in a passive position in their narratives, and described themselves as objects of men's desire – all reasonably in accord with Soviet gender ideology. In short, Temkina observes, their sexual lives were ruled by others and by the surrounding conditions.

But this is not the dominant story among younger women, who have grown up in the turmoil of the 1990s and under the new capitalist regime. These women describe themselves as having agency in their sexual lives, being more likely to emphasize seeking their own pleasure, or using their sexuality to gain benefits, i.e. bargaining with men. They are still under constraints. As the limited Soviet emancipation of women was rolled back, neo-traditionalist ideologies of gender emerged, and a new public patriarchy was constructed. But the young women of the 2000s are making more conscious choices about sexuality, contraception and relationships, being more inclined to see their lives as women as a project than as a destiny.

When the Women's Liberation movement said 'the personal is political', they were making a point that still holds good. There is a gender politics in our most intimate relationships and decisions. Struggles here are not susceptible to sweeping gestures; the complexities are many, the price of change can be high, and sometimes one just wants to forget it. But this intimate politics always underlies the more public politics and cannot be abandoned.

## Public politics: movements and institutions

It used to be thought that political movements directly expressed an underlying interest or group identity, that they simply represented a class, a sex, a nation. Or if they didn't, they should – and would, once a little problem of false consciousness was fixed.

We now recognize more complexity in political processes, and recognize that language and symbolism are more than reflections – they construct identities and help create movements. Yet it would be as much a mistake to assume interests are *only* discursively constructed as it was to assume the opposite; this would be to privilege one dimension of social

life over all the others. Movements in gender politics do in fact follow the broad outlines of social divisions and interests that are defined in power relations, economic relations and emotional relations, as well as in discourse. By and large, movements for change in patriarchal gender orders have arisen from women, or from marginalized groups of men; by and large, the defence of patriarchy has been undertaken by men and by relatively privileged women.

Historically the most important movement in gender politics has been feminism. I have said so much about this movement earlier in the book that I won't say more here. It is necessary to say that not all political movements among women are feminist. Raka Ray's (1999) study of women's politics in India gives a classic example. The Communist Party of India (Marxist), the long-term governing party in the province of West Bengal, established a women's organization called Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti. This functioned mainly to implement the official line coming down from the male leadership of the party – and that line insisted on solidarity between working-class women and men, not on the specific interests of women. Consequently the women of the Samiti, while working for women's economic and educational advance, shied away from anything that implied a direct challenge to men – for instance, from making a public issue of domestic violence, though that was a major issue for feminists all over India.

Of course this is not peculiar to India. Postwar Japan, for instance, saw a remarkable growth of women's organizations – women had gained the vote, and in the 1950s and 1960s were an important constituency. As Kazuko Tanaka (1977) describes, the men's parties set up women's auxiliaries to claim this constituency, and there were also big state-based women's organizations; the whole amounted to a large-scale organization of women. But these organizations were tied to a patriarchal political system. When Women's Liberation arrived, it represented a radical break. As in the United States and Europe, the claim for *autonomous* women's organization was a vital departure – and from that, the shape of modern gender politics has developed.

Gay Liberation, emerging in the United States at almost the same time, similarly involved autonomous organization, combining the personal and the structural. Public demonstrations produced similar feelings of exhilaration and common purpose. Lesbian and gay politics, however, involved another dimension, the process of 'coming out'. Making a declaration to oneself, one's family, one's friends and workmates can be difficult and takes time. Adjustments and realignments in everyday life have to be made. The collective process of establishing a community, an identity in the culture, and a presence in politics and economic life both depends on the individual process and supports it.

There was an extra complication in gay politics, because a gender division ran down the middle of it. Lesbians and gay men are not in the same social situation, or even the same political situation – laws that criminalized homosexual sex for men, in many countries, ignored women. So did some gay male activists. Gay Liberation itself was mainly a men's movement – though the iconic action with which it began, the 1969 'Stonewall' anti-police riot in New York, was led by transsexual and transvestite prostitutes. Tensions around the representation of women in homosexual politics have continued.

A decade after the emergence of Gay Liberation, homosexual men's politics was transformed by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. A whole new set of relationships, with doctors and the state, had to be negotiated, while a hostile symbolic politics about infection, pollution and uncleanness, whipped up by homophobic religious leaders, politicians and media, had to be dealt with. Both jobs had to be done in a context of illness, bereavement and fear. Gay communities in the metropole not only survived this terrible crisis, but evolved new responses and community education approaches, creating AIDS support organizations and the 'safe sex' strategy (Kippax, Connell, Dowsett and Crawford 1993). In poor countries, men who have sex with men (MSM, an awkward phrase that AIDS researchers and campaigners evolved to cover many different situations and identities) lack economic resources, and may also face homophobic governments. This is a serious problem in Africa, which has the highest burden of HIV infection and illness. Governments in Senegal and Zimbabwe, to name two, have made homosexual men targets for blame and persecution – which has disrupted AIDS prevention work.

Though there are some homophobic movements, what AIDS activists mainly came up against was not a movement, but an institutional structure that uses established authority to pursue gender politics. And this is also the main opposition that feminism has met.

There are explicitly anti-feminist movements, to be sure, such as the charmingly named 'Women Who Want to be Women' that once existed in the United States and 'REAL Women' that still exists in Canada. Small 'fathers' rights' groups who are fiercely hostile to feminism arise in many countries, and accuse divorce courts of being biased against men. Anti-abortion movements, usually drawing on the membership of hard-line churches, have been the most successful anti-feminist campaigns of all, intimidating abortion providers, and eventually capturing control of many international aid programmes via the US government.

Even this, however, depended on right-wing control of the US state. The biggest force of resistance to women's reproductive rights internationally has been the Catholic church. As Mala Htun's (2003) study

makes clear, church intransigence has prevented abortion reform right across Latin America in the last generation. (The entirely predictable outcome is that rich women can get safe abortion, poor women cannot.)

The defence of patriarchal gender orders has not, on the whole, required social movements among men. It has been accomplished by the normal functioning of the patriarchal institutions described in previous chapters – the state, the corporations, the media, the religious hierarchies. Certainly there is political intent: most mass media in the world are persistently anti-feminist, some of them (such as the Murdoch media empire) strikingly so. But for the most part, this political intent hardly needs to be articulated; everyday practice does the job.

Take, for example, military forces, which are easily recognized as patriarchal institutions. Frank Barrett (1996), researching gender patterns in US naval officer training, documents an oppressive but efficient regime emphasizing competition, physical hardness, conformity and a sense of elite membership. This is designed to produce a narrowly defined hegemonic masculinity, and therefore it creates serious problems for women trainees, since women began entering US military forces under 'equal opportunity' principles. The training works by linking the sense of personal worth to the needs of an organization that specializes in violence. Similar patterns are seen in Sinclair-Webb's (2000) account of military training in Turkey, already discussed; in Ruth Seifert's (1993) study of military training in Germany; and in other countries.

Not all men buy in to the defence of patriarchy. There is even resistance to military training where it is socially obligatory, as Sinclair-Webb shows. One of the most interesting forms of gender politics in the last generation has been the emergence of gender-equality movements among heterosexual men (called 'pro-feminist' men in the United States). Most of these movements are small, and local in their effects. Tina Sideris (2005) describes one that emerged in South Africa, where since the end of apartheid there has been a public principle of gender equality in tension with longstanding and often violent local patriarchies. Sideris describes interviews with a group of men in the rural Nkomazi region near the border with Mozambique, who are trying to move to a more respectful and gender-equal practice in their lives. All are married, with children. They are able to renegotiate the gender division of labour in their households, and adopt nonviolence. But they find it difficult to shift the meaning of masculinity away from being a head of household; in this gender regime, the authority dimension seems hardest to shift.

That is an informal movement; in other places gender-equality politics among men is more organized. For instance, I have read a *Trainer's Manual* produced by four non-government organizations in India,

intended for change programmes among men and boys (SAHAJ 2005). This carefully designed resource includes modules on equality, on gender itself, on sexuality, health, violence and facilitation skills. It is highly practical, and obviously grows out of organizational experience in campaigns both with men and with women. Its coverage is reasonably like the syllabuses of educational programmes for boys and young men I have seen in other countries, including my own.

Finally, I should recall that gender politics also occurs in social movements that are not explicitly gender- or sexuality-based. Nina Laurie (2005) illustrates this in the 'water wars' in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 1999–2000. In this famous struggle, a local mobilization overcame the attempt by a neoliberal national government and an international corporate consortium to privatize the water supplies. The leaders became international heroes. Laurie notes how the course of the struggle involved a contest between styles of masculinity, expressed in language and subjectivities – the neoliberal modernizer, the marginalized local engineer, the indigenous or mestizo organizer – with an unexpected outcome, the defeat of the transnational executives. Further back in history, the same point has often been made about the celebration of heroic masculinities and the marginalization of women in colonial liberation movements, in union movements and in ethnic identity movements.

### The stakes: patriarchal dividend, gender harm and gender good

What is political about gender? In one of the foundation texts of Women's Liberation, *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett (1972: 23) defined politics as 'power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another'. What made her argument scandalous was that she applied this definition to the relation between women and men.

Power, as will be clear from the analysis in this book, is only one form of gender inequality. Inequalities exist across a range of resources, from income and wealth to social honour and cultural authority. Inequalities construct interests (whether or not the interests are articulated). Those benefiting from inequalities have an interest in defending them. Those who bear the costs have an interest in ending them.

Gender inequalities are usually expressed in terms of women's lack of resources relative to men's. For instance, chapter 1 cited statistics that show women's average incomes, world-wide, as about 56 per cent of men's. While this way of presenting information makes sense in establishing a case for reform, it continues the bad old habit of defining

women by their relation to men. We should also turn the equation around and consider the surplus of resources made available to men. The same figures, read this way, show men's average incomes, world-wide, as 179 per cent of women's.

I call this surplus the *patriarchal dividend*: the advantage to men as a group from maintaining an unequal gender order. Money income is not the only kind of benefit. Others are authority, respect, service, safety, housing, access to institutional power, emotional support, and control over one's own life. The patriarchal dividend, of course, is reduced as overall gender equality grows.

It is important to note that the patriarchal dividend is the benefit to men *as a group*. Some men get more of it than others, other men get less, or none, depending on their location in the social order. A wealthy businessman draws large dividends from the gendered accumulation process in advanced capitalism. On a world scale, the dividends may be almost in the realm of fantasy – consider the fortunes of Bill Gates (\$56 billion), Warren Buffett (\$52 billion) and Carlos Slim Helú (\$49 billion), the three richest humans in 2007. By contrast, an unemployed working-class man may draw no patriarchal dividend in an economic sense at all. Specific groups of men may be bluntly excluded from parts of the patriarchal dividend. Thus homosexual men, in most parts of the world, are excluded from the authority and respect attached to men who embody hegemonic forms of masculinity; though they may, and in rich countries often do, share men's general economic advantages.

Some women also participate in the patriarchal dividend, generally by being married to wealthy men. Such women draw from the gendered accumulation process, i.e. live on a profit stream generated in part by other women's underpaid and unpaid labour.

Considerable numbers of women in rich and even middle-income countries are able to benefit directly from other women doing the domestic labour in their households; very often, women from disadvantaged ethnic groups, such as Black or Latina women in the United States. A multi-lateral international trade in domestic work has now developed. For instance, very large numbers of Filipina women are now in domestic service in middle-class households in eastern and southern Asia, while other women travel from Moldova in eastern Europe to domestic service in Turkey (Chang and Ling 2000, Keough 2006). This transfer of domestic labour has allowed many middle-class women to move into professional or business careers, without putting pressure on middle-class men to raise their share of domestic labour.

The patriarchal dividend is the main stake in contemporary gender politics. Its scale makes patriarchy worth defending. The small band of sex-role reformers in the 1970s who attempted to persuade men that

Women's Liberation was good for them were undoubtedly right about the costs of hegemonic masculinity. But the same reformers hopelessly underestimated the patriarchal dividend. They missed what very large numbers of men stand to gain from current arrangements in terms of power, economic advantage, authority, peer respect, sexual access, and so on. Thus they missed the interest most men have in sustaining – and, where necessary, defending – the current gender order.

To argue that the current gender order should be changed is to claim that it does more harm than good. The harm of gender is first and foremost in the system of inequality in which women and girls are exploited, discredited and made vulnerable to abuse and attack. The still massive incidence of domestic violence, rape and child sexual abuse (mainly, though not exclusively, of girl children) is an easily recognized marker of power and vulnerability. In official discourse, such 'problems' are the actions of a minority of men out of control. But they would not occur on the scale they do unless violence and abuse were sustained by the interplay of many other mechanisms of the social order, which operate in the economic, cultural and emotional dimensions.

The harm of gender is also found in specific patterns in the gender order that are given power to affect the world by the collective resources of the society. Contemporary hegemonic masculinity, to take the most striking case, is dangerous, regardless of the patriarchal dividend. It is dangerous because it provides a cultural rationale for inter-personal violence, and because, in alliance with state and corporate power, it drives arms races, strip mining and deforestation, hostile labour relations and the abuse of technologies from motor transport to genetic engineering. It is harmful to men themselves; the masculinity reformers were on strong ground when they argued that men would be safer not fighting, would be healthier without competitive stress, and would have a better life with improved relations with women and children.

But if gender in these respects is harmful, it is in other respects a source of pleasure, creativity and other things we greatly value. Gender organizes our sexual relationships, which are sources of personal delight and growth; and our relations with children, which are sources of cultural delight and growth. Gender is integral to the cultural riches of most regions in the world, from *Nob* plays to reggae and hiphop. It is difficult to imagine Shakespeare's plays, Homer's *Iliad*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Rumi's poetry, the *Ramayana*, or Bergman's films, without gender. The joys, tensions and complications of gender relations are among the most potent sources of cultural creation.

It is one of the most attractive features of recent queer politics that it has rediscovered the energy of gender practices, by shifting them off their conventional axes. Starting with the US direct action group Queer Nation

in 1990, a great deal of creativeness has been unleashed in a variety of cultural forms. Pleasures in gender display, in erotic inventiveness, in alternative embodiments, in games with gender language, are very evident.

This pleasure and skill can be found in other spaces too. In the elementary schools studied by Barrie Thorne, for instance (chapter 2), there is no doubt that the children took pleasure in learning to do gender. The lifelong gender projects I defined in chapter 6 are not tales of woe; they are for great numbers of people complex and satisfying accomplishments. Moments where the integrity of a gender project is lost, moments of gender vertigo, can be extremely distressing experiences.

I would argue, then, that the stakes in gender politics include the value of gender as well as its harm. Gender politics has the possibility of shaping pleasures as well as distributing resources, and making possible a more creative culture.

### The nature and purpose of gender politics

Given these possibilities, 'gender politics' has to be understood as more than an interest-group struggle over inequalities. In the most general sense, gender politics is about the *steering* of the gender order in history. It represents the struggle to have the endless re-creation of gender relations through practice turn out a particular way.

This definition includes the intimate politics of personal life as much as the large-scale politics of institutions. The making of the configurations of practice that we call 'masculinities' and 'femininities' has a political dimension, is a matter of social struggle. Consciousness-raising, formal education and therapy are among the benign forms. School and family discipline, confrontational policing, imprisonment are less benign but equally political, being applications of power intended to shape personality – and often calling out protest masculinity among working-class and ethnic minority boys and young men. Advertising and entertainment directed to children and youth are among the manipulative forms.

Though there have been stateless societies, and gender politics occurs in many other arenas, the state (both national and international) is the most important focus of gender politics in the contemporary world. Even in a neoliberal era, where the market is exalted and many public institutions are privatized, the state remains the most important steering mechanism in economies. And it has powerful steering capacities in other areas of life too, as the story of women's reproductive rights shows. The state has power to grant, or deny, recognition to groups, movements, institu-

tions and individuals. State authority even makes an authoritative determination of an individual's position in the gender order – mine is stated on a birth certificate issued by the State of New South Wales – and either prevents, or sets rules for, changing that determination.

Therefore the state is not only the most important institutional player in gender politics, it is also the stake in a great deal of gender politics. Movements constantly try to influence how the state acts, or even to capture some part of state power, in order to steer the gender order in the direction they want. Women's parties have, so far, had little success in electoral politics. But women's movements as pressure groups or as elements in coalitions have had significant impacts; and at certain times gay rights movements have, too. When a Labor Party government replaced a conservative coalition in Australia in 2007, it undertook to reform laws and regulations that discriminated against lesbian and gay couples – for instance in tax, health and social security – and found more than 100 discriminatory measures in existence.

The significance of the state is very clear when we think about the involvement of heterosexual men in achieving gender equality. Without question, this has moved furthest in Scandinavia. The story is told in some detail in Øystein Holter's *Can Men Do It? Men and Gender Equality – The Nordic Experience* (2003). Only a few generations ago, the Nordic countries were socially conservative places with economies dominated by heavily masculinized industries – fishing, timber, mining – resulting in a stark gender division of labour. Gender relations have changed; Scandinavia now leads the world in women's representation in the public realm, men's involvement in child care, and other measures. The state's role in that change has been crucial; for instance, in providing economic support for fathers' involvement in the care of young children. Men do change, Holter argues, when the surrounding conditions allow it, and public policy can make the difference.

It is often clear what gender reform movements are fighting against – discriminatory laws, gender-based violence, social oppression. But what are they fighting for? What are the ultimate goals? Where do they want to steer society, in the long run?

Here there is a significant division, related to the discussion of inequality and gender harm in the previous section. Many feminists think that gender is inherently about inequality. In effect, they see the patriarchal dividend as the core of the gender order, and gender harm as unavoidable in any gender system. Logically, then, they see the goal of gender politics as the abolition of gender. As I remarked in chapter 5, this represents a conceivable 'end of history' for gender relations, where the reach of gender relations around the reproductive arena is reduced to zero.

An exceptionally clear statement of this view is offered by the US feminist Judith Lorber in *Breaking the Bowls: Degendering and Feminist Change* (2005). Recognizing that gender, however interwoven with other social structures, 'still exerts an enormous organizing, socializing and discriminatory power', Lorber sees two possible responses: acts of individual rebellion, or a strategy of de-gendering. She argues for de-gendering families, workplaces and politics; for seeking the abolition of gender wherever it is found; and for defining 'a world without gender' as the goal.

But there is another possibility. While de-gendering is a good tactic in many practical situations (for instance, those affected by anti-discrimination laws), as an ultimate goal it is extremely pessimistic. For it assumes there is a whole realm of human relations that cannot be democratized, and so must be abolished.

The real alternative to de-gendering, it seems to me, is a strategy of gender democracy. This strategy seeks to equalize gender orders, rather than shrink them to nothing. Conceptually, this assumes that gender does not, in itself, imply inequality. The fact that there are in the world gender orders with markedly different levels of inequality is some evidence in support.

That democratization is a possible strategy for a more just society is indicated by the many social struggles that have actually changed gender relations towards equality. The Nordic public policy regime just mentioned is a large-scale example; the intimate politics that has gone into producing the American 'fair families' described by Barbara Risman (1998) is another; the village-level economic changes catalyzed by Prince Thangkiew in the Meghalaya hills (chapter 2) are a third.

A logic of gender democratization, rather than gender abolition, has some points to recommend it. It would be easier within this strategy to preserve what I called, in the previous section, gender good – the many pleasures, cultural riches, identities and other practices that arise in gender orders and that people value. It does not imply isolating the reproductive arena from social structures and institutions, but rather socially organizing the processes of conception, birth, baby care and child rearing on equal and inclusive lines. It connects the logic of gender reform with the ideals and practices of democratic struggle in other spheres of life. I don't think any strategy of gender reform will be easy – on that, everyone in the field will agree – but these look like significant advantages.

## Gender politics on a world scale

Through this book I have emphasized, as contemporary gender analysis does, both the diversity of situations across the world and the global

scope of gender issues. Chapter 7's analysis of the emerging global gender order suggests two transnational arenas of struggle for democratization: in global institutions and in the interactions between gender orders.

Democratization in the arena of global institutions is straightforward in concept though difficult in practice. It is the same kind of process as the democratization of institutions at the national or local level. In practical terms, it means such things as attempting to get equal employment opportunity in transnational corporations, ending the misogyny and homophobia in international media, gaining equal representation of women and men in international forums, ending gender discrimination in international labour markets, and creating anti-discrimination norms in the public culture.

A world-wide agency of change is already in existence. Feminist movements have a presence in international meetings (Stienstra 2000). This works to some extent through diplomatic delegations, and more consistently through the growing presence of non-government organizations. NGOs are now a recognized category of participants in United Nations activities and some are explicitly feminist. They interact with the women's units or programmes in international organizations such as UNESCO, and there is a certain amount of coordination of these activities through the UN Division for the Advancement of Women. There is also some international presence of gay and lesbian movements, particularly in human rights agencies and in the UN Global Programme on AIDS.

These forces have been able to place some issues about gender relations on the agendas of diplomacy and the international state. The United Nations set up a Commission on the Status of Women as early as 1946. Article 2 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights banned discrimination on the basis of sex, as well as race, religion, etc. It has been followed by specific agreements about the rights of women, culminating in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, introduced in 1979. The human rights agenda has been far more important than the 'men's movement' in winning support for gender equality from men in international organizations – support that has been vital in creating the spaces in which women's groups have operated.

The most important consequences of this pressure have been in development agendas. From the 1940s to the 1960s a global apparatus of development aid was created (both driven, and distorted, by Cold War politics). It was accepted early that improving the literacy, skills and knowledge of girls and women was a key move in development and 'modernization' (at a time when modernization was uncritically accepted as a goal). Consequently, in most parts of the world, a vast social investment was made in the elementary education of girls and in adult literacy programmes for rural and working-class women. Over time, this effort

took on a gender-equality logic, and was pushed forward into secondary and higher education – where it is still active. One of the current UN Millennium Development goals, adopted in 2000, is to promote gender equality and empower women, with the specific target of eliminating gender disparities at all levels of education by 2015.

Alongside the education agenda, linked through the idea of improving human capital, was an economic aid agenda. Agencies such as the World Bank, as well as bilateral aid between governments of rich and poor countries, funded programmes to provide infrastructure, machinery, fertilizers, seeds (for the 'Green Revolution') and other means of economic growth. Before long it became obvious to feminists that not only were men in control of the aid programmes, most of the benefits went to men, and often women's lives were disrupted. The response was the 'Women in Development' agenda, which was pressed on aid agencies from the 1970s, to divert funds towards women in the recipient countries, and to recognize the consequences for women of existing development strategies.

In the 1990s a major debate occurred around this agenda. It was argued by some that a focus on women alone was ineffective; that men had to become change agents too if gender equality was to be achieved. A 'Gender and Development' strategy was proposed instead of 'Women in Development'. It was argued by others that bringing men into the only part of the global development agenda where women had actually consolidated power might reinforce patriarchy, not challenge it (White 2000, Chant and Gutmann 2002).

Similar debates were occurring in other arenas, as 'gender mainstreaming' ideas took hold in the European Union as well as the United Nations. It became important, therefore, to look at the specific role of men in gender equality processes. The issue was acknowledged in very general terms at the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women. A more serious examination was launched in UN forums in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This culminated in a policy document 'The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality', adopted by the 2004 meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women: the first broad international agreement on this issue (Connell 2005). Over the next decade, we will see if it has an effect.

It is already clear that the forces pushing for gender democratization in global arenas are still weak in relation to the scale of the problem. They still have very little influence on transnational corporations and global markets. Obedience to anti-discrimination laws in head office does not prevent transnational corporations maintaining sharp gender divisions in their global workforce. Their characteristic search for cheap labour around the world often leads them, and their local suppliers, to

exploit the weak industrial position of many women workers. This is especially the case where unions are hampered, or where governments have set up free-trade or special development zones to attract international capital (Marchand and Runyan 2000).

Even in the United Nations system, there is no unified force for change. The World Conferences on Women were vital in articulating world agendas for reform. But among the delegations attending were some from conservative Catholic governments, and some from conservative Muslim governments, actively opposed to gender equality. Therefore these conferences have seen sharp conflict over issues such as abortion, contraception and lesbianism. Even the concept of 'gender' was under attack at the 1995 Beijing conference, because it was supposed by right-wing forces to be a code word for feminism (Benden and Goetz 1998). Largely because of this conflict, the conferences have now ended.

Some of these divisions arise from the second dimension of global gender politics, the relations between gender orders. This is a more conceptually complex problem.

During the 1980s, divergences between the gender politics arising in different parts of the world were widely canvassed. The idea of 'third world feminism' emerged, contrasted with the feminism of the global metropole. While equality between women and men could be seen as a mark of modernity, it could also be seen as a sign of cultural imperialism. Forms of metropolitan feminism which emphasized women's autonomy aroused opposition from women who did not want to be separated from the men of their communities in struggles against racism, colonial or neo-colonial domination (Bulbeck 1988, Mohanty 1991).

Even conceptualizing a democratic agenda in this dimension is difficult. The interplay between gender orders arises historically from a system of global domination, that is, imperialism and colonialism. A democratic agenda must oppose the inequalities that have been inherited from this system, between global 'North' and global 'South'. This is a strong point made by those women who argue against separate political organization.

Yet the dilemma this leads to is troubling. The colonial system, and the globalized world economy, have certainly been run by men. But the anti-colonial struggle, too, was almost everywhere led by men. Post-colonial regimes have generally been patriarchal, and sometimes deeply misogynist or homophobic. In post-colonial regimes, the men of local elites have often been complicit with businessmen from the metropole in the exploitation of women's labour. Multinational corporations could not operate as they do without this cooperation. In places like the Philippines and Thailand, men of local elites have been central in the creation of international sex trade destinations. Arms trafficking similarly involves

an interplay between the men who control local military forces and governments, and the men who run arms manufacturing corporations in the metropole.

The interplay between global structures and local gender orders certainly leads to change, but this is not a simple process. Sonia Montecino (2001), in a study of social diversity in Chile, writes of 'identities under tension'. Among women, for instance, a commitment to motherhood (often with religious undertones) remains strong. But in the new export-oriented economy, paid work is also becoming a basis of identity for middle-class women, rupturing the old symbolic meanings of gender. A similar observation is made by Dennis Altman (2001) about sexuality: the interplay with global capitalism has produced a range of novel identities, patterns of relationship, sexual communities and political processes. They belong neither to local nor to metropolitan cultures, but in a sense they belong to both – and more exactly, to the emerging global social order.

The forms of politics are also multiple. Feminists in the UN system are constrained by bureaucratic and diplomatic processes. The transnational feminist groups described by Valentine Moghadam in *Globalizing Women* (2005) generally reject bureaucracy and operate on an informal network basis. Even these groups are varied in structure and task: some focusing on trade and economic policy, some on solidarity work, some on contesting violence and social inequality.

Yet another layer of complexity is epistemological. The varied political movements around the world involve varied understandings of gender issues. In chapter 3, I adopted Bulbeck's argument that these are in some sense incommensurable; we cannot claim that any of them has an overriding claim to truth. In the context of gender politics, however, we cannot pause until we have resolved epistemological antinomies; we have to find practical ways of going on.

This is, more or less, what happens in human rights politics. Ambiguous general declarations, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, get read in different ways, but with enough overlap to allow many practical measures to be taken – each involving multi-lateral negotiations, and often conflicts.

Much the same is true of efforts at globalization from below by feminist movements in different parts of the world. Without exact agreement on concepts or even goals, enough overlap can be found to make practical action possible. In an essay called 'Transnational solidarity', Manisha Desai finds several common themes in women's resistance to neoliberal restructuring: asserting a right to work, struggling for a better quality of life, and nurturing nature. The book in which this essay appeared,

*Women's Activism and Globalization* (Naples and Desai 2002), collects many examples of women's organizing that reaches across borders. They show, however, a widespread problem; the links are most commonly South–North, i.e. between a group in a developing country and a group or agency from the metropole. Nevertheless, South–South relations are developing, and taking new forms, as shown by the World Social Forum, first held at Porto Alegre in Brazil in 2001. In gender politics, a notable example is the cooperation among Latin American feminist researchers that produced continent-wide statistics on the situation of women, and a sophisticated index of the level of achievement of gender equality (Valdés and Gomáriz 1995, Valdés 2001).

Let me add a final thought – my contribution to the layers of meaning. The criterion of democratic action in the world gender order must be what democracy always means: moving towards equality of participation, power and respect. In global spaces, this criterion applies at the same time to relations within any gender order and to relations between gender orders. Contradiction can't be avoided. The conflicts at the World Conferences for Women illustrate the point. Migratory domestic labour illustrates the point. The sex trade illustrates the point. The dilemmas of homosexual men under homophobic regimes illustrate the point. Yet progressive movements cannot evacuate these arenas simply because democratic practice is difficult. Anti-democratic forces are certainly not evacuating them.

As feminism has found, one cannot go global without being profoundly changed. Knowledge about gender has to be reconsidered again and again, in the light of the changing gender dynamics that appear in world gender politics. Given this willingness to learn, I am convinced that gender theory and research can play a significant role in making a more democratic world.