CHAPTER 35

THE DIALECTICS OF POWER AND POWERLESSNESS IN TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST NETWORKS

Online Struggles Around Gender-based Violence

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Introduction

Transnational feminist networks (TFNs) provide feminist activists with a platform to advocate on a range of issues confronting women, from reproductive health and human rights to violence against women and economic security. Operating formally and informally across state and regional borders (Moghadam 2005; Dempsey, Parker, and Krone 2011), the activism and advocacy of TFNs has created a "transnational public sphere" (Fraser 2007). These networks have become truly transnational through the extensive use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), creating vibrant spaces for mobilizing and to debate global, national, and local issues. Yet despite their success in generating global resources, publicity, and support for local issues (Dempsey, Parker, and Krone 2011), they run the risk of privileging, consciously or otherwise, global agendas over local articulations of issues. In particular, tensions within the feminist movements over issues of race, class, and nationality, as well as among varying understandings of women's rights, access to resources, and cultural identity that underpin ideas of citizenship, mark the work of TFNs. Thus, while the debates and discussions in virtual spaces by TFNs invoke notions of gendered citizenship, they also reflect competing dialectics of power and powerlessness among feminist activists.

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In charting the dialectics of power and powerlessness, we look at the ways in which the issue of violence against women, a long-standing feminist concern (McMillan 2007; True 2012), is discussed and mediated online by two TFNs: Women Living Under Muslim Law and 50 Million Missing. In our examination of these networks we problematize the notion of power in TFNs whose agendas explicitly focus on violence against women. The issue of violence against women, in its various manifestations, has been a key feminist issue globally and holds significant implications for women's inclusion in the public sphere and their role as citizens. As Lister (1997, 113) comments, "If women cannot move and act freely in the public sphere and/or are intimidated in the private sphere because of the threat of violence, then their ability to act as citizens is curtailed."

We use the term "violence against women" as opposed to "gender-based violence" because the UN definition of violence against women encapsulates its gendered nature: "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (UN General Assembly 1993). We recognize that men and boys can also be victims of gender-based violence (especially sexual violence), but we wish to specifically draw attention to the disproportionate numbers of women who experience violence.

We then examine how agendas of TFNs compare with local articulations of violence against women by analyzing the remarkable response of urban youth in India, both physically and virtually, to the gang-rape and murder of a young woman in Delhi in December 2012. Following blogs and social media postings on the much-publicized incident in India, we identify how ideas of citizenship are embedded in online forums in a specific national context, allowing a comparison of potentially competing ideas of citizenship against the backdrop of violence against women. Following the online discussions of the Delhi gang-rape presents an opportunity to explore how diverse networks of women and men simultaneously negotiate "the cultural politics of cyberspace" (Escobar 1999, 32) alongside the place-based politics of gender and cultural violence. Our analysis of the use of ICTs by TFNs is not refracted through the bifocal lenses of dichotomized good and bad or empowered and disempowered. Instead, we look at how online discussions of gender and violence grapple with the tensions of power and difference.

TFNs, Power, and Difference

Despite the persuasive discourse of global sisterhood invoked in the 1970s in the West, feminist movements both nationally and globally have been riven by issues of power springing from the differences of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, and ability/disability. Recognizing the conflicts and power inequalities embedded within the sphere of women's activism, some scholars distinguish international feminism, global feminism,

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and global sisterhood from a notion of transnational feminism (Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Mendoza 2002; Moghadam 2005). Whereas international feminism of some sort has existed from the beginnings of the twentieth century, transnational feminism is more recent and linked explicitly to processes of globalization; the emergence and spread of ICTs, especially the Internet; and the UN conferences on women. Transnational feminism, some argue, appears to offer a way of thinking about women in their diversity, allowing attention to unequal power relations among them (e.g., Alexander and Mohanty 1997). But what does this mean in practice? How have TFNs negotiated the construction of a transnational public sphere that is responsive to the differing experiences of power and powerlessness among feminist activists? In particular, has the use of social media by TFNs facilitated or hindered the development of such transnational public spheres on specific women's issues, such as violence against women?

Transnational advocacy networks (TANs), of which TFNs are a part, comprise "those actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 2). TANs include governmental and nongovernmental actors, the media, and regional and international bodies. Given the challenges and difficulties of organizing transnationally, TANs emerge around particular issues that have "high value content and transcultural resonance" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 200). More specifically, TFNs are defined as "structures organized above the national level that unite women from three or more countries around a common agenda, such as women's human rights, reproductive health and rights, violence against women, peace and antimilitarism, or feminist economics" (Moghadam 2005, 4). They reflect the shared context of women's struggles against exploitation that allows for a transnational solidarity (Mohanty 1997).

In contrast, other feminists have raised concerns about the potential for TFNs to essentially rework the homogenizing discourse of a "global sisterhood" that ignores fundamental issues of structural inequalities and the complicity of Western feminists—by virtue of citizenship, nationality, and class—in neoimperialism and global capitalism. For example, Desai (see chapter XX) points out that women from the third world have been challenging "feminist theory to go beyond the trinity of race, class, and gender, and include other structures of power such as nationalisms, religion, and development that impacted their daily lives." Mendoza argues that although embedded in the concept of transnational feminism is "the desirability and possibility of a political solidarity of feminists across the globe that transcends class, race, sexuality and national boundaries," TFNs have failed to deliver a basis for solidarity (2002, 296). Transnational networking can also increase the divide between elites and the majority of women who have access neither to the Internet nor to transnational networks (Basu 2000, 76).

These critiques, often by women of color and third world women, point to the unequal power relations within women's movements. Yet as Moghadam (2005) and Keck and Sikkink (1998), among others, have argued, the global mobilization against "violence against women" shows how feminists have successfully come together around

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a common agenda to exercise policy influence at national and international levels. The construction of this common agenda was, of course, neither automatic nor inevitable, as feminist scholarship demonstrates. Indeed, Weldon argues that much of the scholarship on social/women's movements that attributes "successful cooperation to shared interests, identities, or opportunities is incomplete because it does not take account of relations of *domination* among activists who cooperate" (2006, 55).

Rather, it was through developing "norms of inclusivity"—"a commitment to descriptive representation, the facilitation of separate organization for disadvantaged social groups, and a commitment to building consensus *with* institutionalized dissent" (Weldon 2006, 56)—that TFNs succeeded in achieving cooperation. Weldon argues that although violence against women was on the agenda of the transnational women's movement by the mid-1970s, it could only influence governmental agendas and bring about policy change (e.g., getting recognition of women's rights as human rights) two decades later, because "activists could not overcome relations of inequality within the movement until they developed norms of inclusivity" (59).[1]

TFNs and Virtual Spaces

To what extent have ICTs and social media networks helped or hindered the development of such norms of inclusivity and thereby shaped the work of TFNs on the issue of violence against women? This question is particularly relevant in the twenty-first century given the explosion in the use of the Internet in a variety of forms by activists globally. According to Moghadam (2005), the new ICTs have allowed TFNs to function effectively without being bogged down by formal bureaucratic structures because they can "retain flexibility, adaptability, and non-hierarchical features while also ensuring more efficiency in their operations" (p. 17). The power of online activism for feminist movements is further underscored by Martin and Valenti, who see the need to bring together online and offline work:

> *Online feminism has the power to mobilize people—young, old and everyone in between—to take political action at unprecedented scale at unprecedented speeds. . . . Online feminism has transformed the way advocacy and action function within the feminist movement . . . . While the times we are living in call for social justice movements to embrace decentralization, our technological tools allow coordination among a much broader, more motley collection of organizations and individuals than ever before. The challenge is to ensure that the mechanisms of coordination and agenda setting are supported.*
>
> (2013, 3–5)

This positive assessment is in many ways an extension of the general acknowledgment by feminists of the role of media in facilitating feminist ideas and building solidarity networks among members of TFNs.

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At the same time, there is a sense of powerlessness among social media networks. These networks, like old ICTs, are also implicated in the spread of capitalism and globalization, which can both generate oppressive transnational movements as well as counter movements that challenge global inequity and injustice (Bacchetta et al. 2002; Balchin 2002). Online news media and forums, social media, and other ICTs are not neutral actors but rather active mediators of power through their role in framing issues and determining whose voices are heard and in what context. Despite their best intentions, some TFNs, like transnational media, become sucked into the driving premises of capitalism and are then unable to relate to the needs of some of the most oppressed and deprived sections of the citizenry.

Of critical interest in looking at social media's role in the work of TFNs is the way in which difference and issues of power are negotiated in the blogosphere. If conflicting norms, values, and ideologies about women's rights, women's autonomy, and the terms of women's access to public and private spheres—in other words, the stuff of citizenship—are articulated in virtual spaces by TFNs, then how are differences in perspectives negotiated? For Martin and Valenti, online activism has boundless power to bridge the gap between the stakeholders in the feminist movement: "It's boundary-crossing work—cross-generational, cross-class, cross-race, cross just about every line that still divides us both within and outside of the feminist movement" (p. 4). Yet such networked activism remains powerless in closing the gap between the rich and the poor as well as the upper classes/castes and socially marginalized people in accessing online technologies. These technologies include the use of video-blogging via YouTube; microblogging through Twitter, which allows people to post quick and short messages of no more than 140 characters from their mobile devices; and expressive blogging via Tumblr, a platform used by people to express themselves through essays, poems, or stories. The differences in the abilities of a variety of groups of people to access and use the Internet to circulate online petitions and post accounts of violence and other forms of injustice are still huge. Feminist mobilizing by the netizen-constituents of TFNs on "violence against women," therefore, is marked not only by the tensions between cultural norms and universal values and between women and state institutions, but also by broader issues of power relations between and among feminists.

Feminist Conceptions of Citizenship: The Challenges of "Violence against Women"

Much of the scholarship on citizenship invokes the notion of the public sphere as the space for the exercise of the rights and responsibilities of the citizen. In the context of citizenship, the public sphere is clearly viewed differently from the private sphere: "Where the public sphere is seen in liberal political theory as the space of politics, power, and

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civic engagement, the private sphere is seen as the familial space of intimacy and care, where all things personal are protected from the intrusive power of the state" (Kurian, Munshi, and Bartlett forthcoming). This dichotomy between the public and the private, however, has been challenged by many feminist scholars (e.g., Pateman 1989; Young 1990; Lister 1997; Okin 1998), who have pointed out the implicit gendered identification of men with the public realm and women with the private. Critical perspectives, including those of feminists, suggest the vital importance of recognizing the inseparability of the public and the private, with due recognition "of the interrelationship of the individual to collective life, or personal to political life, instead of their separation and opposition" (Pateman 1989, 135).

That there can be no absolute definitions of citizenship is also evident in the critique of universalist assumptions about citizenship, which often marginalize those outside the mainstream (see, e.g., Young 1989; Fraser 1997; Kymlicka 1995; Dryzek 2000). Women of color/third world feminists, lesbian feminists, and others have in fact challenged the hegemony of white Western feminism and have demonstrated the myth of the unitary woman as as well as of a monolithic third world woman (Lister 1997; Mohanty 1988). Critiquing the homogenizing discourse of universal citizenship and a neutral polity, Young (1989, 251), for example, calls for the recognition of rights based on group differences in order to ensure the inclusion and participation of everyone in the public sphere. Yet ideas of group recognition run the risk of reifying essentialized identities that may undermine or suppress other forms of difference (Mouffe 1992; Phillips 1993, 2007), while lending themselves to other forms of oppressive practices in the name of culture, tradition, or religion.

Despite such contradictory tensions, citizenship remains an attractive ideal for many feminists, offering the possibility of a just, egalitarian, and equitable society (see, e.g., Dietz 1987; Lister 1997) because citizenship shifts the frame from passive "beneficiary" to active agents of change. Thus Lister (1997) calls for a "politics of solidarity in difference" (80) that recognizes the political subject "as made up of manifold, fluid, identities, which mirror the multiple differentiation of groups" (81). Treading the fault lines between the universalist conceptualization of citizenship and the anti-universalism of postmodernism, Lister argues for a "differentiated universalism" formed of a "dynamic synthesis of the universal and the particular which offers a way forward for a feminist formulation of citizenship" (Lister 1997, 90). She cites Young to argue that while universality as impartiality is a fiction to be rejected, it is still worthwhile to uphold the "universality of moral commitment"—a commitment to the idea of "equal moral worth and participation and inclusion of all persons" (Lister 1997, 88).

These tensions between the universal and the particular play out in the work of TFNs on the issue of violence against women. Feminist struggles on a range of issues at the national and local levels, including rape, sexual violence during conflict, domestic violence, female genital cutting, dowry deaths, and sex trafficking of girls and women, have been transformed in the last few decades into a common global concern about "violence against women." As noted previously, the development of "norms of inclusivity" in the feminist movement alongside the recognition

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of "material common interests, issue-frames, identities, and the support of powerful states" (Weldon 2006, 59) resulted in the acknowledgment of violence against women as one of the most significant women's issues globally. Representing the convergence of two distinct movements—human rights and women's rights—"violence against women" was created as an issue by TFNs through "naming, renaming, and working out definitions, whereby the concept. . . eventually unified many practices that in the early 1970s were not understood to be connected" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 171). The framing of a diverse range of issues as violence against women "resonated with [a] transcultural consensus" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 196) and thus helped sustain global advocacy networks. Although it took a long struggle by women's groups, the United Nations finally passed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. CEDAW has been ratified by 187 states to date and "forms the basis for national legislation to enable women to enjoy and exercise all human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural and other spheres based on the principles of non-discrimination and equality with men" (see chapter XX). Another successful push by women activists and organizations resulted in the UN conference on human rights in Vienna in 1993 recognizing women's rights as human rights.

Given the time taken by women's organizations to address issues of power differentials, structural inequalities, and divergent agendas, it is perhaps unsurprising that "violence against women" is not mentioned in the primary international document on CEDAW (although it is referenced in some CEDAW general recommendations and articles). Indeed, violence against women became a focus for the United Nations only beginning with the 1985 UN World Conference on Women in Nairobi. As Midori Kaga (2013) comments:

> *Part of the problem in trying to make gender equality a reality is the continued misconception that violence against women is a separate "women's issue". In fact, violence against women is one of the most visible outcomes of gender inequality: an inequality that is deeply woven into the social, economic, and political fabric of society, affecting men and women.*

At the level of international response, however, a global policymaking forum that addresses the issue explicitly is the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The CSW was set up in 1946 by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), dedicated exclusively to ensuring women's equality and promoting women's rights. Its mandate is to "prepare recommendations and reports to the Economic and Social Council on promoting women's rights in political, economic, civil, social and educational fields" and to make recommendations "on urgent problems requiring immediate attention in the field of women's rights" (ECOSOC 1946.). It meets annually to assess progress on gender equality and sets policies and standards to advance women's empowerment.

The CSW has done pioneering work alongside other agencies of the UN to champion universal women's rights and challenge entrenched gender inequalities, with some of its

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greatest triumphs acknowledged to be the achievements of the 1994 Cairo Conference on Reproductive Rights and the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing. As Zwingel (2005) notes:

> *Two factors helped the CSW to develop such a powerful position in a sometimes hostile organizational environment: first, the establishment of a separate women's place within the UN framework that enabled the delegates to define, elaborate and advance "women's rights, responsibilities, and contributions as citizens" (Galey 1995: 24). The second factor is the affiliation of the CSW within the UN and its simultaneous connection to nongovernmental women's organizations. NGO participation in CSW sessions was relatively high.*

In 2013 the CSW's priority theme was elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls, having failed in 2003 to reach agreed conclusions on the issue. Although the CSW chose the topic of violence against women in 2003, global and national events and actions—such as the 50 Million Missing campaign against India's "female genocide," which continues to grow since its launch in 2006; the rape and death of a woman in December 2012 in Delhi; and the One Billion Rising global campaign to end violence against women, launched in February 2013—have added momentum to the cause. Yet at the same time, the CSW has faced sustained pressure from conservative governments and anti-choice/anti-abortion and religious organizations to roll back the gains on women's rights made over the last few decades, especially on reproductive and sexual health, and the responsibility of governments to tackle gender violence. Despite intensive lobbying and counterlobbying, however, the CSW succeeded in getting consensus on a final document on violence against women at its meeting in March 2013.

This consensus notwithstanding, a perennial issue that continues to confront women's activism from the global to the local is the conflict over the universality of women's rights versus the particularities of religion, culture, and tradition. In part, women across the boundaries of states, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and race have always faced the reality of culture and national identity being written on their bodies, often in the form of practices that limit, in fundamental ways, their ability to exercise autonomy and protect bodily integrity. The CSW, comprised of member states (at least two of which currently challenge the universality of women's rights as human rights in their official discourse), while working closely with women's NGOs, constantly negotiates this tension as it seeks to articulate a statement of agreed conclusions each year that it can submit to the UN.

In what follows we first examine the definition and scope of the term "violence against women" (VAW) in the final agreement that emerged from the 2013 CSW meeting. We then examine two TFNs that were active at the CSW, looking in particular at their submissions to the CSW and the specific focus of their recommended actions on violence against women and girls. We analyze the implications of such constructions of VAW, focusing particularly on the tensions between the universal and the particular and the understandings of spatial politics that emerge in the struggles against VAW.

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Such tensions resonate with the internal tensions that also mark women's movements transnationally. We also look at what notions of citizenship are implicitly or explicitly invoked in online discussions on violence.

The CSW and Violence against Women

The 2013 CSW Draft Agreed Conclusion adopts the UN definition on violence against women referred to previously in this chapter. In addition to this comprehensive definition, the document spells out the causes of violence that women experience, covering historical and structural inequality in power relations between women and men, the use and abuse of power and control in public and private spheres, the link to gender stereotypes that underlie and perpetuate such violence, and the multiple forms of discrimination that expose women and girls to increased risk of violence.

The statement emphasizes the universality of women's experience of violence across all societies and that women's rights are human rights and therefore non-negotiable: "The Commission recognizes that *all human rights are universal*, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated and that the international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner" (Paragraph 15). In doing so, the commission stresses that even though "various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of states regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms" (Paragraph 15).

The statement identifies various forms of violence:

> *Violence in armed conflict and post-conflict situations; the linkages between violence against women and girls and a range of other issues including education, health, HIV and AIDS, poverty eradication, food security, humanitarian assistance and crime prevention (Paragraph 20); the need for women's economic empowerment and full and equal access to resources to address the structural and underlying causes of violence (Paragraph 19); violence in public spaces, including sexual harassment, which can limit women's ability to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms (Paragraph 23); gender-related killing, such as femicide and foeticide (Paragraph 24); and the vulnerability of older women and indigenous women to discrimination and violence (Paragraphs 6 and 27).*

In addition, the statement includes detailed sections on the importance of strengthening the implementation of legal and policy frameworks and accountability in light of CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Section B of the document is dedicated to "addressing structural and underlying causes and risk factors" in order to prevent violence against women.

For the first time the CSW included in its agreed conclusions a paragraph that addresses the link between VAW and information and communication technologies

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(ICTs). This echoes the comments of the Expert Meeting Group that met in November 2012 ahead of the 2013 CSW meeting:

> *For example, experts agreed that the role of new media presents a number of layered and complex challenges, as well as opportunities, for the prevention of violence against women and girls. In the first instance, new media is often a platform for the perpetuation of harmful masculinities and the objectification of women and girls. This can take a number of forms from everyday hyper-sexualised, one-dimensional images of women and girls to hard-core pornography which has moved from the peripheries to the mainstream of the pornography industry. Virtual spaces are also utilised to perpetuate direct attacks on women and girls. This can range from cyber-stalking to the posting of inappropriate images/videos of women. For example, women have increasingly reported incidents of footage of them engaged in sexual activity (filmed both with and without consent) being posted on internet sites without their consent. In a number of cases this has included the posting of footage of actual rapes.*

The statement also provides an overview of the multifaceted approaches required to address violence against women, as well as the need to improve the "evidence base" through research on and analysis of violence against women and girls.

The CSW meeting in March 2013 resulted in some notable gains, as well as some losses. The very fact that there was an "agreed outcome document" was a victory, given the concerted efforts to prevent this. In addition, commentators pointed to the following major achievements: (1) inclusion of new text on protecting women working for women's rights who face violence both because of their work and because of their gender (Section A, paragraph z); (2) continued emphasis on sexual and reproductive rights, including the recommendation that emergency contraception and safe abortion be provided to women who have been raped (Section C, paragraph iii); (3) a call for the development of comprehensive sex education (Section B, paragraph k); (4) introduction of more specific language against "child, early and forced marriage" rather than just "child" marriage; and, (5) most significantly, the deletion by CSW chair Marjon Kamara of a contested paragraph that reaffirmed the sovereign right of each country to implement CSW recommendations "consistent with national laws and development priorities, with full respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of its people." This deletion countered earlier perceptions that women's rights were "optional and provided a get-out clause for unsupportive governments" (Harvey 2013; Ford 2013).

Among issues that failed to make the concluding statement were sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as protection for sex workers. Women activists also noted the push to strengthen the traditional concept of the heterosexual "family" as the most important unit in society to combat violence rather than recognize and support women as individuals (Harvey 2013), even though the home is the site where women are most likely to encounter violence.

Overall, the CSW final agreement on violence is marked by a broad inclusion of many of the most egregious kinds of violence experienced by women and girls that need to be tackled by states through a combination of institutional responses, legislation, enforcement of human rights provisions, and a commitment to bring about changes in values

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through the transformation of repressive cultural traditions and practices. But as an activist commenting on the efforts of governments to overturn international commitments to protecting women's rights noted, "Women's rights have become a kind of bartering chip to be traded away for political agendas that have little or nothing to do with the interests and wellbeing of women and girls" (Vivian Thabet quoted in Ford 2013). It is in neutralizing the political agendas of nation-states that TFNs play an important role.

TFNs Mobilizing on Violence against Women

The significance of the CSW's work is that, unlike many other UN agencies, it has been heavily influenced by women's NGOs, including TFNs and grassroots organizations, which provide input, lobbying, and resources to the process of negotiating issues around gender equality. Much of this negotiation is carried out online, straddling different notions of citizenship and core tensions of feminist politics such as those of universal values versus cultural specificity and the spatial politics of the global versus the local. We look specifically at the workings of two TFNs that have devoted significant attention to violence against women. Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML), founded in 1984 by Algerian feminist Marieme Helie Lucas, brings together grassroots activists from formal and informal organizations, individual women, and scholars across the Muslim world. It won an award for the "top non-profit group" to work on violence against women.[2] 50 Million Missing, an online feminist global advocacy campaign started by India-based author and activist Rita Banerjee in 2006, raises awareness about the "female gendercide" in India.

Although there are significant differences between these two TFNs in scope, kinds of actions undertaken, and the political ideologies that shape them, both are fiercely critical of patriarchal and misogynistic social and political structures, cultural relativism, and religious fundamentalism. The following discussion draws on the information available on their Web sites, feminist scholarship on the WLUML (see, e.g., Shaheed 1994; Ackerly 2000; Balchin 2002; and Moghadam 2005), as well as the extensive writings of the founder of 50 Million Missing. In the writings and actions of these TFNs we can also see how power and powerlessness coexist in varying ways and how particular ideas of women's citizenship are articulated in the work that they do.

The WLUML

The WLUML describes itself as "an international solidarity network that provides information, support and a collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam" (http://www.wluml.org/). It is especially well known for its "Violence Is Not Our Culture" campaign, which focuses

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on challenging religious and cultural impunity (http://www.violenceisnotourculture.org/). Started in 1984 in response to several instances of human rights violations against Muslim women, the WLUML has grown slowly and organically to create a powerful network of more than two thousand women across forty countries (Shaheed 1994). These women have a range of views on Islam, women's rights, faith, and secularism, and the WLUML offers avenues to learn and exchange information about these differences, thus illuminating the diversity of views and practice within the Muslim world. It seeks to create and strengthen networks of solidarity between women and women's groups within Muslim communities and provide support for their struggles "by creating the means and channels needed to support their efforts internationally from within and outside the Muslim world" (Shaheed, 1994, 1006).

The WLUML thus harnesses the power of globalization to challenge identity politics, nationalist politics, and democratization processes that ignore women's rights (Moghadam 2005, 155). It is sharply critical of oppressive practices—honor crimes, female genital mutilation, and others—that are justified in the name of culture, whether in Muslim-dominated societies or Western liberal democracies with superficial policies on multiculturalism (Moghadam 2005). The agenda for action is locally driven and aims to create national and international solidarity for specific cases of attacks on women and for broader women's issues (Shaheed 1994; Ackerly 2000; Moghadam 2005; see also Moghadam [chapter XX] for a discussion on local activists seeking transnational connections).

Although the WLUML has no formal links with UN agencies, it has participated in UN events such as the pivotal UN Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, the UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, and the 57th CSW meeting in New York in March 2013. At the CSW meeting, the WLUML hosted a panel on "stop stoning forever" with its partners, the Stop Stoning Forever Campaign (Iran), the Research Institute for Women Peace & Security (Afghanistan), the Women's Intercultural Network, and the Women's UN Report Network. The partners also submitted a statement against stoning, where they called on all states

> *where stoning still exists in law and in practice to abide by their international human rights obligations, banning stoning through legislative measures and holding perpetrators accountable to law. This includes Iran and Mauritania, two Member States currently sitting on the UN Commission of the Status of Women.*
>
> (AWID 2013)

Pointing out that women are disproportionately the victim of stoning, the statement describes stoning as a "cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment" that cannot be tolerated, arguing that "the universality of human rights must be upheld." The statement then moves from this universalist position to the repudiation of the specific claim that such a practice is Islamic:

> *Even though there is no direct reference to this form of punishment in the Quran, stoning is often claimed to be part of "Islamic Law". There is absolutely no consensus amongst the global Muslim community over the validity of the practice as "Islamic*

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> *Law", and many clerics, scholars and Muslim-majority States have prohibited stoning, as a violation of human rights.*
>
> (AWID 2013)

The WLUML also was a named supporter to a statement from the Arab Caucus of NGOs at the CSW 57 that called upon Arab governments to

> *stop using justifications based on religion, culture, tradition or nationality to block the progress of laws at all levels, including in the sphere of international law and at this 57th session of the CSW. These justifications must be challenged. The violence they cause is unacceptable and cannot ever be condoned or tolerated.*

The WLUML has thus challenged attempts by states to use and abuse ideas of cultural relativism to defend violence against women. The on-the-ground work by the WLUML embodies in many ways the "women, culture, and development" paradigm (Bhavnani, Foran, and Kurian 2003) that recognizes the centrality of women's agency and the active creation of new cultures of change by women and men at all levels of society in any effort to bring about transformative social change. Its extraordinary work notwithstanding, the WLUML too experiences internal and external conflict and criticism. Shaheed (1994, 1018), a key member of the WLUML, comments:

> *[T]he network can simultaneously be seen as being "too Islamic" and not Islamic enough (or of consisting of people who "go about Islam in the wrong way") . . . . Some local, national, or regional women's groups with conflicting analyses and priorities may seek to become the exclusive WLUML links in their country; others may want WLUML activities and networking to encompass only like-minded organizations. A few feel that WLUML should only be a network of Muslim women, excluding all who fall outside such a definition . . . . From outside the network, a few parties feel that WLUML's activities (especially the human rights alerts for action) contribute to a negative image of Islam and Muslims or of a particular country.*

Similarly, Balchin comments:

> *The network is an entity that does not exist totally in the "imagined community" of a feminist cyberspace (although the strength of networking linkages depends considerably on the use of the Internet). Nor does it exist purely on the ground (although the strength of linkages equally depends upon the solidarity and warmth of face-to face interaction). It is imagined and real, global and local, which presents challenges both in terms of sustaining linkages and funding.*
>
> (2002 128–129)

Clearly, the WLUML actively negotiates issues of power and powerlessness daily in its interactions among its members, its formulation of its action plan (done in face-to-face meetings), and the actual work it undertakes. In the staunch endorsement of the universalist discourse of women's rights as human rights, it upholds Young's (1989) notion of "the universality of moral commitment" that is uncompromising on the need to recognize women's equal status in the public and private spheres. It is no doubt true that their

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critique of state and religious practices against Muslim women feeds into already existing negative stereotypes of Islam in the West and could serve neoimperialist agendas of invasion and war. Yet they also forcefully articulate sharp critiques of the US invasion of Iraq, the bombing of Afghanistan, and the overlooking of women's continued oppression even in countries where so-called democratic regimes have been installed, illuminating their central argument that both patriarchy and capitalist forces must be stopped. Thus, the WLUML appears to successfully create a deliberative space where active discussion and debate is fostered and where "norms of inclusivity" (Weldon 2006) have been robust enough to continue strengthening the linkages between women in the Muslim world.

We now turn to a network that has not sought formal institutional support from international organizations but is still committed to a core concern of the CSW. Unlike WLUML, which regularly participates in CSW meetings, 50 Million Missing works outside institutional frameworks. However, its advocacy campaign to end female genocide in India is aligned with the CSW's concern about violent gender-related killings of women and girls, even in countries where opposing the concept of femicide has been incorporated in national legislation.

50 Million Missing

The 50 Million Missing campaign was started in 2006 on Flickr, an online photo-sharing and organizing platform, by Rita Banerji, an Indian writer and activist. A separate Web site for the campaign was started in 2008 and identifies its three primary goals as (1) to raise public awareness and consciousness nationally and globally of the "scale of the ongoing female genocide" and to urge community-based action for justice; (2) to lobby for international acknowledgment of genocide under the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide Act; and (3) to lobby for time-bound governmental and international action to end the genocide: "We want to have the government of India commit to a time-line within which India's female genocide will be contained, and all associated practices like dowry, dowry murders, infanticides and feticides eradicated" (http://genderbytes.wordpress.com/about/).

The campaign is driven by and centered on its founder, although it has supporters and activists in a number of countries. According to Banerji (2009), "the campaign is run entirely by volunteers. There are six administrators and four moderators from seven countries all working online. Our Flickr site is supported by 2000+ contributing photographers from over 25 countries, and has a photo gallery of more than 13,000 photos of Indian girls and women." Thus, it represents one form of a TFN that functions predominantly via electronic media, using the Internet and a variety of social media to raise awareness and instigate action for change.

The trigger for starting the campaign occurred when Banerji began research for her book *Sex and Power: Defining History, Shaping Societies* (2006), which explores gender and sexuality, including ideas about sexual morality and customs, in Indian society over four periods spanning three thousand years. Its central argument is not radical in itself: the sexual morality of a society is shaped by the dominant power structure at any

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given time. But she argues that the dominant patriarchal ideology of society is driving what she terms the current female genocide in India. Commenting on the nature, scale, and horror of the violence perpetrated against women, she says:

> *In another two decades, India will have annihilated 20 percent of its female population. To get an estimate of how many women that would be, add up the entire populations of Sweden, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium and Portugal. In less than a century, more than 50 million women have been targeted simply for being female and wiped out from India. Millions have been killed before birth. Millions killed as infants. Millions killed as little girls. Thousands killed as new brides. Thousands killed as they are forced through repeated, back-to-back, unsafe abortions to get rid of girls. Thousands more killed for so-called "honor" or branded as "witches" and mob lynched. And many burnt alive as widows on the pyres of their husbands. Killed at every stage of life–simply for being female! There is no other human group in history that has been persecuted and annihilated on this scale. So, how did the world close its eyes to this?*
>
> (Banerji 2012)

Banerji argues that there is a lack of response both globally and within India because alongside a general lack of awareness of the magnitude of the issue, the way in which the issue has been dealt with in terms of numbers, ratios, and statistics of "missing women" has dehumanized the violence. Furthermore, she argues that violence against women has been internalized and normalized by society to such an extent that despite the scale of the violence against girls and women in India, little action has been taken (Banerji, 2012). She states:

> *But I think the worst part of it is that while all other forms of systemic and mass-scale violence are seen at some conscious level as outrageous by people everywhere, the female genocide in India doesn't evoke the same response (though I think now it is beginning to). I realized that violence against women is actually internalized by societies—particularly in India—but even in the west. At some deep, collective level of social thought we're adjusted, we have normalized violence on women and girls, in a way that would be otherwise abnormal and unacceptable when inflicted on any other group. The female genocide in India is therefore not just a statement on India, but it is a statement on how the global community thinks of violence and women.*
>
> (Banerji in Hefferon 2013)

The 50 Million Missing campaign voices a powerful critique of patriarchal culture with its inherent misogyny and devaluation of women. It points a finger at the stark brutality of the violence that sees even a "model" development state like Kerala, with a positive female-male ratio (see, e.g., Amartya Sen's work on the Kerala model of development), now reported to have an increasingly skewed child sex ratio, possibly because of female foeticide (Viju 2012). The global reach of the campaign continues to spread the message, thereby meeting the first of its goals of raising public awareness, but there is little evidence yet of how effective it has been. Certainly there appears to be little chance of getting international agreement to label the ongoing violence as genocide, as defined by the United Nations.

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From a feminist perspective, the campaign appears to embody key elements of a radical feminist take on violence against women. The primary emphasis on patriarchy as the explanation for the ongoing violence against women has resulted in ignoring the multiplicity of intersecting realities that frame women's lives, including class, caste, and ethnicity. Thus, nowhere in 50 Million Missing's campaigns and writings do we see any kind of attention to the sustained oppression that Dalits (the lowest castes in the social hierarchy) have faced over millennia, specifically the violence meted out to Dalit women. Banerji's discussion of the relation of Vedic culture, laws of Manu, and other historical religious roots to the low status of women fails to acknowledge that these norms were primarily focused on a "caste" society (that permeated all religious communities), but not the millions who were outside the boundaries of caste: the Adivasi (indigenous/tribal) communities and those recognized by the Indian Constitution as the Scheduled Castes. The relative freedoms and more equitable gender relations that have historically marked these communities are ignored. The broad sweep approach to violence against women in India thus elides the nuances, contradictions, tensions, and multiple facets that are part of a complex reality.

Banerji (2012) is also fiercely critical of Indian feminists, who, she states, reject "the notion of a deep-rooted, tradition-fed gender hierarchy in India, defined, dominated and exploited by men" and also deny the role of "patriarchal oppression" in explaining the status of women. Such criticism is undoubtedly important to voice and justified in specific instances, but here again her tarring of all "Indian feminists" with the same brush ignores the vibrant and diverse movements and voices in the country, many of which have been in the forefront of decades of activism against violence. Banerji's writings, which form the basis for the campaign, also embrace universal ideas of human rights, while culture is viewed as an unsalvageable source of oppression for all women. The campaign's ideas of citizenship, therefore, leave little room for negotiating the particularities of culture in any form.

Ackerly points out that "in order for social criticism to reflect the views of the vocal and the silent, critics need to promote inquiry, deliberative opportunities, and institutional change in the society. . . No critic alone could adequately provide an account of a diverse reality" (2000, 174). Does 50 Million Missing fulfill these criteria? Although the campaign provides an important voice of critique, it appears less able to grapple with the tensions of power and powerlessness *among* women and the importance of being inclusive of the multidimensional aspects of the transnational feminist struggle against violence. It appears thereby to forego the possibilities of building feminist alliances and providing spaces for deliberative discussions.

Having examined the contested ideas of citizenship reflected in the flows and ebbs of power and powerlessness in the online organizing of TFNs with a global reach, we now discuss how these ideas compare with the ones that surface in discussions on violence against women in specific local contexts. Following the online discussions of the much-publicized Delhi gang-rape also allows us to explore the intersections between virtual and place-based politics of gender and cultural violence.

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Online Protests against Violence at a Local Level: The Delhi Case

On December 16, 2012, a young woman was brutally gang-raped on a bus in Delhi while returning home with a friend after a movie. The rape and subsequent death of the twenty-three-year-old woman, a physiotherapy student, triggered an outpouring of protest across the country led by young people. Women's organizations, lawyers, celebrities, university students, and others participated in these protests on an unprecedented scale. The mobilization of tens of thousands of people around India received extensive media attention both nationally and internationally. Uniquely for India, where "old ICTs" such as radio, television, and print media dominate, social media networks were widely used for the first time by activists and the media to disseminate information and updates about the protests, as well as to debate and discuss the problem of violence against women in India. Thoughtful blogs by women and men were posted on Facebook, as were links to news articles and commentaries on the issue, generating wide-ranging discussions.

After initially catching the political establishment off guard, the protests led to the government of India setting up the Justice Verma Committee to submit a report within a month offering recommendations on appropriate reforms to existing laws to address sexual assault. The committee received more than eighty thousand submissions from jurists, women's groups, civil society organizations, and individuals and submitted a widely acclaimed report with major recommendations in January 2013, the most significant of which were ultimately ignored in the Criminal Law (Reform) Ordinance that was passed by Parliament in February 2013.

The Delhi case reignited intense discussions in India on what was seen to be a deep-rooted culture of misogyny, manifesting in violence against women and girls in numerous forms, from female foeticide; to multiple forms of sexual harassment of women in public spaces; to rape not only within the family but also perpetrated by the police, the armed forces, and the upper castes/classes. Although violence against women in general, and sexual assault and rape specifically, has perhaps always been prevalent in India—both within marriage and outside the home—there has been a staggering increase in the incidence of reported violence. For example, according to the 2011 statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau, there has been a *792 percent* increase in reported rape since 1971, dwarfing other serious crimes such as murder (106 percent) and kidnapping (298 percent).

There is no dearth of feminist analysis of the causes of violence against women in India. Butalia (2011), for example, comments:

> *And then came another valuable lesson: the understanding that, no matter which way you looked at it, the crime of rape proliferated not only because of social attitudes, but because of a tacit agreement among men—policemen, lawyers, judges, investigating*

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> *officers, politicians—that women who were raped were somehow asking for it. And that the fact of growing urbanization, of women entering different kinds of jobs added to the threat—for women were now in the running, too, venturing into what has so far been male territory.*

Similarly, a columnist for the *Guardian*, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (2013) stated: "The rape and murder of the young Delhi student in India, or physical violations in the Congo, South Africa and so many other lands, are a backlash against emancipation and equality."

The routinized nature of sexual assault is evident in the general apathy thus far displayed by the news media and society at large in reporting violence against women—it was no longer seen as significant "news" or newsworthy as such, getting only a short paragraph or so. So what made this particular Delhi case different from the numerous instances of rape reported in every city every day? Why this case, and why now? The answers to these questions have been varied, including attributing the response to a middle-class/upper-caste reaction to an attack on "one of their own" (as opposed to the numerous attacks reported on lower-caste and tribal women and girls). Perhaps it was the sense that the victim represented the educational and professional aspirations of millions of urban youths, or that no finger could be pointed at her dress code or her "respectability," or perhaps it was the fact that her male companion survived and was able to narrate the grotesque and graphic story of the attack.

Commentators in India have also pointed out several noteworthy aspects of the recent protests. Shakil (2013), for example, identifies three distinct issues marking the protests. First, she points out that reports on incidents of rape are usually followed by advice to women to change their behavior—their dress, their movement out of the house in the evenings, and so on—so that they do not "provoke" attacks. This time, women fought back, their creative and powerful slogans reclaiming the freedom of the public space on their own terms and circulating globally on social media: "*mahilaein mange azadi, sadak pe chalne ki, raat mein nikalne ki, kuch bhi pehenne ki*" (women demand freedom, to walk on the streets, to go out at night, to wear anything); "*nazar teri buri, chehra main chupaun?*" (you are the one giving the bad/evil eye, why should I hide my face?); and "*meri skirt say uunchi meri awaaz hai*" (my voice is higher than my skirt) (Shakil 2013). Second, unlike previous mobilization by activists in India on issues such as rape and dowry deaths, which were marked almost exclusively by women protesting and pushing for reform, this time the protests involved young men and women in large numbers. Shakil (2013) argues that "this may be a turning point in our country, wherein, *women*'s issues have transitioned into *gender* issues." Third, the protests "have given rise to one of the most widespread and democratic debates in our country on women's rights" (Shakil 2013), a debate in which young people have taken the lead. These vibrant discussions, carried out as much in online forums as in face-to-face gatherings and meetings, have revolved around varying aspects of women's rights, ranging from analysis of the causes of the ubiquitous violence against women and girls in India, to the nature of governmental

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and institutional response to this issue and what such response ought to be, to strategies for addressing these issues. It is important to keep in mind that these conversations did not take place in isolation.

The proliferation of social media networks has allowed TFNs to foster cross-national linkages between and among feminists and civil society in unprecedented ways today. This has also led to greater access to global and national policymaking forums—although with what effect remains to be seen.

Potential and Limits of ICTs

The WLUML, the 50 Million Missing Campaign, and the Delhi case demonstrate that TFNs do provide a platform for the local articulations of issues, particularly through debates and discussions facilitated by the use of ICTs. The local-global link is evidenced by recent discussions held online regarding the post-MDG agenda. For example, The World We Want Beyond 2015, a Web platform, was set up by the UN and Beyond 2015 (a global civil society campaign comprising more than seven hundred organizations) to inform the deliberations of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda set up by the UN Secretary General.

Gender inequality was the third most popular topic discussed under the theme of inequalities (http://trends.worldwewant2015.org), with violence against women being a major focus. The seven priority areas of the online discussions on the World We Want Beyond 2015 voice many of the concerns of the WLUML, the 50 Million Missing Campaign, and those protesting the Delhi case, including the need for investing in changing people's mindsets about gendered norms, examining masculinity, engaging men and boys in violence prevention, and ensuring greater accountability of state and nonstate actors for ending violence against women.

Similarly, the "Synthesis Report on the Global Thematic Consultation on Addressing Inequalities," which was submitted to the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons, points out that "the prevalence of violence against women and girls across the world is a matter of profound importance and concern. Gender-based violence, directed against women and girls because they are female, or affecting them disproportionately, is perhaps amongst the most universal of deep social ills, representing a systematic pattern of behaviour, characteristic of many societies" (UNICEF and UN Women 2013, 38). The report clearly shows how honor killings (an issue central to the work of the WLMUL), sex-selective abortions (the focus of the 50 Million Missing Campaign), and sexual violence (the Delhi case) reflect the "severe diminution of the perceived humanity of women and girls" (UNICEF and UN Women 2013, 36).

The issue of violence against women and girls also found its way into "A New Global Partnership," the Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. While acknowledging that a one-size-fits-all development

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agenda was bound to prove ineffective, the report categorically states "in a few cases the ambition for the whole world should be the same: to establish minimum standards for every citizen. No one should live in extreme poverty, or tolerate violence against women and girls" (United Nations 2013, 15).

Given that ICTs play such a significant role in how TFNs articulate their agendas and advocate for their inclusion in global policy documents, it is also important to consider their limitations. Who has access and which platforms they have access to significantly influence what issues "trend." Although the Delhi case saw an outpouring of disgust and fury, the gang-rape of four minor girls in Jharkhand (India) subsequently (http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/articles/490982/20130716/india-gang-rape-school-girl-pakur.htm) has not made a blip in the blogosphere. And although the far-reaching recommendations of the Justice Verma Commission set up as a result of the Delhi case received some attention, the watered-down adoption of the recommendations in the new "anti-rape law" (The Criminal Law [Amendment] Act 2013) did not see mass street protests or much discussion in online forums, except on some men's rights forums. One such forum, managed by the Save Indian Family Foundation (SIFF), in fact saw the Verma Commission's report as another attack on their human rights. A press release by a coalition of (men's) NGOs under the umbrella of SIFF sought to

> *highlight the shocking level of biased and anti-male legal recommendations released by the Justice Verma committee. The coalition is shocked and finds it hard to believe that given the credibility and collective legal experience of the committee how could the committee choose and include only archaic and highly dangerous clauses and exclude female sexual predators who are guilty of committing sexual assault. While the human rights, social rights, and legal rights of women were brought up many times by Justice Verma, none of the same rights have been conferred on men through his legal recommendations. Men cannot expect to get a fair trial should any of these recommendations come into existence.* (http://legalfighter.wordpress.com/2013/01/25/press-release-mens-rights-organizations-condemn-justice-verma-recommendations/)

This warped reaction from a male-centric group suggests that ICTs are not just a technology but also create a space for forming and expanding issue-based networks and counter-networks. Who uses them and how they are used "influence how activists form and shape the social movements" (Lim 2012, 234). As Dalton (2006), Micheletti and McFarland (2011), and others suggest, what we are seeing emerge are new ways to express citizenship beyond voting at elections. These technology-mediated means for citizen activism and expressing citizenship are successful to the extent that they create a sense of shared identity, "a perception among individuals that they are members of a larger community by virtue of the grievances they share. ICTs may be able to foster collective identity across a dispersed population, which organizers can then mobilize in support of collective action" (Christensen 2011).

On the flip side, extensive reliance on these types of technology can marginalize those with limited or no access and in doing so to some extent redefines who does and does not get to express their citizenship, as well as whose voices do and don't get heard.

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Yet another critique is the extent to which these new forms of citizens' participation reflect "slacktivism" (Christensen 2011). It is easy to press "Like" on a Facebook campaign, retweet a call to action, or sign an online petition. The question is whether this is enough to sustain a slow ongoing process of social transformation, especially when we are talking about fundamental issues such as violence against women. According to Christensen (2011), recent research suggests that while we need to be cautious about making tall claims in favor of ICT-mediated forms of citizen activism, there is a positive though weak link between online activism and off-line political participation. In no way does this mean that the former will replace the latter, but online activism can reinvigorate and reinforce off-line political activism. This is true of the work of TFNs as well. As Desai (chapter XX) observes, there are "multiple sites. . . real and virtual" that will create dynamic and diverse TFN interactions to respond to "the changing topography of women's lives."

Conclusion

TFNs have successfully used ICTs to create live, fluid, and open spaces for building awareness, facilitating animated discussions, and creating networks among feminists and activists to initiate global action on violence against women. But as our study of two TFNs using ICTs and a case study of unprecedented social media attention on a rape case in India has shown, online spaces are much more complex than they may appear to be. If women activists in feminist networks gain power in some contexts, they are rendered powerless in others, amid the tensions between the global and the local; access and exclusion; and the competing dynamics of caste, class, and race. What we know very little about is when and under what circumstances online activism spills over into the real world and what impact this has on political decision making. This needs to be the focus of future research.

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Notes

1. Weldon does, however, acknowledge that at the UN World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, a landmark event that galvanized the world's women, although feminists still had the thorny issue of inequality within the women's movement, they were able to come together on the Beijing Platform for Action, which included violence against women as one of twelve focus areas.
2. Awarded by Philanthropedia, http://www.myphilanthropedia.org/top-nonprofits/international/violence-against-women/2011/women-living-under-muslim-laws-wluml.

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