

IIRE seminar: A feminism for the 21st century

Friday 15 December 2017, by [TREACHER Alison](#) (Date first published: 14 December 2017).

In July 2017 Alison Treacher attended a women's seminar organised by the Fourth International at the Institute for Research and Education in Amsterdam. Representatives from 28 countries discussed the current global capitalist crisis, ecological destruction, continued imperialism and new tensions within geopolitics and shared their experience of new protests in response to these intertwined crises. Our discussions explored the particular impact these crises are having on women and the resistance required in this new context, writes Alison.

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In this piece I will focus on summarizing some of the discussions we had on women and migration and the rise of the far right and conclude with an account of the international, intersectional movement which saw 50 countries mobilise against violence against women, demanding environmental justice and workers' rights.

Women and migration

The number of international migrants reached 244 million in 2015 for the world as a whole, a 41 per cent increase compared to 2000, according to UN reports. This figure includes almost 20 million refugees. Women migrate for many different reasons; fleeing war and persecution, as climate change refugees, or for economic reasons, seeking better working conditions for themselves and their families as their country of origin cannot provide decent employment.

These women face many challenges including dangerous journeys across borders and seas. We have seen the tragic loss of life in the Mediterranean sea of migrant women and children fleeing violence from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries. Another example is from Mexico where women face dangerous journeys seeking employment in the US. In Mexico and countries where organised crime and cartels are strong, women face the risks of sexual violence and abduction resulting in forced prostitution and slavery. At the seminar we heard heart breaking accounts from women from Mexico and Brazil speaking of disappearances, sex trafficking, organ trafficking and the desperate search of mothers for their loved ones.

In other countries, such as the Philippines, migration is economically driven, in which poverty, inequality and lack of opportunities force people to migrate for better opportunities. In the Philippines more than 10 million people work outside the country, the majority of these are women, working as in the UAE, for example, as domestic workers. The social impact of this level of migration is devastating with families separated and children being raised without their mothers. In the UK throughout the Brexit campaign we have witnessed how xenophobic campaigns are being used

politically, to dehumanise migrants and present them as enemies, this was replicated Trump's campaign in the US.

These challenges do not end when these women reach their destination country. According to a UN report, 2 out of 3 migrants' destination is either Europe or South Asia. In countries such as Denmark and Italy, xenophobic campaigns have taken on the form of 'feminationalist' rhetoric which claims that migration is undermining the rights and freedoms of the women in the destination countries. The discourse of 'feminationalism' is closely related to homonationalism in which the xenophobic right is claiming that migration is a threat to the rights of the LGBT community.

It is important that we recognise these narratives and ensure we unpick them to reveal their xenophobic intent, and ultimately reject them from our feminism. In Italy in 2015 there were mass protests after a woman was raped on a beach in Rimini. The narrative quickly turned to the perpetrators nationality opposed to male violence against women. One activist from Non Una Di Meno stated that 'We don't want our bodies used for racist and xenophobic campaigns: rape is rape, regardless of the nationality of the rapist. We reject the culture of possession that triggers male violence and we do not accept the blackmail of fear ... The streets of our cities are not savannas infested with predators from which we can defend only by renouncing the freedom to move ... the majority of rapes occur among the domestic walls. The rapist is often a husband, a partner, a father, a cousin.'

A feminist perspective on immigration and migration is important so we are able to recognise these narratives and are prepared to call them out and reject them from our politics.

Women and the far right

As a consequence of the instability of global capitalism, the world has witnessed the resurgence of a more organised, influential far right. In Greece there is Golden Dawn, in France the Front Nationale and in the UK, UKIP. Their economic positions vary, however they have in common a fierce anti-immigrant rhetoric and islamophobic racism. In this new context we are also seeing new forms of fundamentalism increase, movements which cross state borders such as the Taliban and ISIS. The women's seminar discussed how 'theofascism' is a useful term to describe these evolving groups. Religious fundamentalism is a core tenet of their ideology and this reaffirmed the necessity of the old demand for separation between church and state. Women in Ireland, Italy, Poland and Mexico have continued struggles over the rights of reproduction.

Nazila Kivi succinctly expressed the threat of this rise in the nationalism to women in her address to the Women's march in Copenhagen. She states: 'we know that people gendered as women are the first to suffer when nationalist and racist agendas win, because 'woman' as a concept becomes a metaphor for the nation. Our bodies, our right to self determination and our sexual and emotional desires are too contentious to be left in our own hands. That's why, too often, our bodies constitute battlefields, war zones and objects to be conquered, literally and symbolically. The examples are plenty. It's women who are raped in wars, it is women's reproduction that is regulated in order to control or reduce populations.'

International mobilisations and the feminisation of protest

In this new context we have seen an increase in women's resistance, arguably the feminisation of protest, and the birth of an international, intersectional women's movement. This is a process seeing

both increased participation and visibility of women and women's issues being addressed in national discourse. In 2015 we saw in Argentina the Ni Una Menos, huge mobilizations against femicide and violence against women. In Italy and Poland we witnessed huge protests and strikes challenging religious and far right reaction which threatens their rights over their own bodies. In the UK we have witnessed women leading the way in many areas of resistance including housing, the E15 Mums and in the environmental movement with the Lancashire the Anti Fracking Nanas.

On the 21st of January, the day after the inauguration of Donald Trump, there were mass mobilisations across the globe. In the US the marches outstripped the mobilisations of the 2003 Anti War movement. These marches were initiated and led by predominately by women fearing Trump's attacks on both women's and migrant's rights. Although Trump was the catalyst to these demonstrations the level of international response illustrates shared international narratives and anxieties which women face - including attacks on their rights over their bodies, freedoms and the way they wish to live their lives.

On the 8th of March we then saw the International Women's Strike with mobilisations in over 50 countries; with the largest marches seen in Poland, the US, Argentina, Italy, Ireland and Spain. The marches called for the end to violence against women, the rights of migrant, disabled and LGBTQIA sisters, demanding both environmental justice and equal pay. The marches were a move away from institutionalised channels of resistance for example NGO's, charities and individual forms of protest.

Cinzia Arruzza stated in her interview with Penny Duggan on the *International Viewpoint* site that 'these mobilizations are showing a new increasing awareness of the necessity to rebuild solidarity and collective action as the only ways we can defend ourselves from the continuous attacks against our bodies, freedom, and self-determination as well as against imperialist and neoliberal policies. Moreover, they are acting as an antidote to the liberal declination of feminist discourse and practice.'

It is essential, moving forward, that the feminist movement doesn't turn in on itself, and there remain many contradictions and contentions within the movement. It must recognise its diversity and our increased understanding of the social condition of cis and trans women, and layers of oppression which different women face, as a weapon as opposed to something which divides us. It is essential therefore that women who face multiple forms of oppression are ensured visibility and voice, within the movement.

Arruzza continues: 'the only way to give birth to a truly universalistic politics is not by making abstraction from differences, but by combining them together in a more encompassing critique of capitalist and hetero-patriarchal social relations. Each political subjectivation based on a specific oppression can provide us with new insights on the various ways in which capitalism, racism and sexism affect our lives.' Hence a Marxist Feminist perspective is vital for cohesion and coherence moving forward.

There has been much discussion about the use of the word 'strike' in these mobilisations and the emphasis on women's seen and unseen labour. In France, two trade unions, the CGT and the SUD called a general strike at 3.40pm on the 8th an action highlighting the extra social reproductive labour women undertake, which, according to an ILO report, remains 2½ times more than that of men. In the US, the key slogan for the strike was 'Feminism for 99%' in reaction to 'lean in' politics which imply our only remaining challenge is to have more women in boardrooms. In Argentina the Ni Una Menos movement ignited around femicide but also highlighted the slowly inflicted violence of the capitalist system.

The movement and resistance in Britain was not as radical in demands as many of the marches

across the globe. Our movement In Britain has unresolved tensions and contractions including between some (cis) feminists and some trans activists. This was a shared experience and other women reported there were intergenerational tensions with 'old guard' of feminist refusing to engage contemporary ideas.

Marxists can not just be observers in this movement. We need to push past the confines of individual intersections and finding a wider narrative which unites as all. It is only through a Marxist feminist critique of the current global crisis will we realise a universalistic politics which will cross borders and provide the international response required to challenge both gender oppression and capitalism.

Alison Treacher

P.S.

* <http://socialistresistance.org/a-feminism-for-the-21st-century/11249>