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Global Feminist Ethics: Feminist Ethics and Social Theory

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Introduction

Peggy DesAutels

Now it appears, that in the original frame of our mind, our strongest attention is confin'd to ourselves; our next is extended to our relations and acquaintance; and 'tis only the weakest which reaches to strangers and indifferent persons.

—David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 3.2.2.8.

Much of the suffering and many of the injustices in the world are tied to gender inequality. But it's difficult for those of us who live in developed Western nations to determine how best to respond morally to those who live so far away in cultures quite different from our own. Often we feel under-informed, overwhelmed and immobilized, and we thus resort to focusing our moral efforts on those who live closer to home. How can we better respond to worldwide needs and inequities?

Certainly, a first step is to better inform ourselves about current injustices worldwide, and about the understandings, structures, and practices contributing to these injustices. After becoming better informed, we can contribute to organizations, vote for politicians, devote our efforts to causes, and even buy from corporations that we think will best help us meet our global moral responsibilities. If we are academically inclined, we can advance feminist ethical and social theory in ways that focus on global issues and solutions. But even feminist theorizing about global issues can be daunting. Can Western feminists theorize approaches to global suffering and injustice without falling prey to imperialist and essentialist ways of thinking, and without viewing women in the developing world as passive victims in need of saving?

Alison Jaggar has wisely warned Western feminists against naively attempting to "save" impoverished and oppressed women in other countries from their own cultural practices. She reminds us that "poor women in poor countries certainly are oppressed by local men whose power is rooted in local cultures, but they are also oppressed by global forces, including the forces of so-called development, which have reshaped local gender and class relations in varying and contradictory ways, simultaneously undermining and reinforcing them" (Jaggar 2005b, 67). She also points out, following Uma Narayan, that when we assume that the "West is best for women," we also often assume falsely that the West is somehow exempt from "cultural" explanations of its own characteristic practices that harm and victimize women and girls.

Jaggar suggests some directions for intercultural dialogues about justice for poor women in poor countries and asks us to "think more carefully about who these women are and from what or whom they need saving" (Jaggar 2005b, 71). We should raise questions about the global basic structure and about Western government policies that contribute to injustices against women. We should re-examine conceptions of sovereignty that are almost meaningless to poor countries. We should think about problems related to militarism. And we should discuss ways to compensate for past and continuing wrongs through remedial justice and reparation.

Many of the contributors to this volume pursue at least some of Jaggar's suggested themes. They certainly share with Jaggar a concern for the daunting issues facing the globe and approach these issues from a feminist perspective—that is, a perspective that values and promotes the well-being and fair treatment of women while questioning some of the most fundamental assumptions of patriarchal cultures. This perspective recognizes the ubiquity and perniciousness of patriarchy in its multitudinous forms throughout the world and attempts to identify and address at least some of its causes and effects. Just as we need to bring feminist perspectives to global issues, we need to bring global perspectives to feminist issues. Until we do, we may fail to identify very real harms being perpetrated and the roles of social and political systems and practices in contributing to these harms.

This volume contains four sections, the first of which examines some of the special moral concerns that arise from assigning distinct activities and responsibilities to women and men respectively. It is difficult to argue against the view that women and not men are the birth-givers. But it is also true that death rates tied to pregnancy and birth-giving are unacceptably high in developing countries. Are women better off giving birth in hospitals with attending physicians (often male) or in homes with attending midwives (usually female)? Which approach should be "exported" to the developing world? In the first chapter, "Exporting Childbirth," James L. Nelson questions the privileging of technological means over social means for

making birth safer, and examines two distinct practices found in the Western developed world: demedicalized, home-based births with attending midwives in The Netherlands versus medicalized, hospital-based births with attending physicians in the United States. He argues that pervasive social expectations regarding women and childbirth result in forms of obstetrical practice that fail to accommodate much that many women regard as key to their experience of birth.

Childcare and domestic chores are other activities and responsibilities primarily assigned to women in Western and non-Western cultures alike. Women are expected to provide not only the unpaid labor involved in raising their own children and maintaining their own dwellings, but also, in many cases, the low-paid labor for raising the children and maintaining the homes of others. How can women working as paid domestic laborers best be protected from degradation and exploitation? Sabrina Hom, in her chapter on the morality and politics of paid housework, argues that because domestic labor can no longer be meaningfully distinguished from other forms of labor, the best way to protect paid domestic laborers is to encourage social networking and political organization. The particular political strategies used by Chicana housekeepers in the United States are offered as a possible model for other domestic laborers to follow.

In the following chapter focusing on gender identity and the ethics of care in globalized society, Virginia Held expresses optimism that progress is indeed being made toward decreasing gender inequities throughout the world, particularly those associated with sharp differentiations between "women's work" and "men's work." She argues that the ethics of care is especially well suited to guiding this progress and to resisting backlash responses against it.

Part two of this volume addresses how best to respond to certain universal human needs, such as those for food and other basic necessities. Marilyn Fischer's chapter, "Caring Globally: Jane Addams, World War One, and International Hunger," describes Addams' mobilization of American women to enter into "relations of caring" with the hungry in Europe during World War One. According to Fischer, Addams' pragmatic approach to international ethics parallels that of such contemporary care theorists as Virginia Held and Joan Tronto and can meaningfully inform contemporary efforts to extend care into the international arena. Of special relevance to global needs today are Addams' strategies for caring for those far distant, and for avoiding maternalism/paternalism and imperialism in one's caring efforts.

In "Food Fights: A Feminist Perspective," Victoria Davion points out that throughout the world, many more women than men are responsible for food production, food shopping, and food preparation. When there are food shortages, however, women and girls often eat last if at all. Thus

women have a special interest in food availability and safety. Offering a feminist perspective on the scientific and ethical issues surrounding genetically modified food, Davion argues that fears over the safety of such foods are justified at both local and global levels. After examining some of the arguments used to encourage people to trust genetically modified food "choices," she argues that such arguments assume a "model of autonomous neoliberalism that is highly problematic from a feminist perspective."

Global poverty is certainly one of the most significant moral issues we face. It is also morally worrisome that many more women than men appear to be poor. But is it actually the case that women are disproportionately poor relative to men? And if so, what is the proportion? And to what extent are they poorer? In order to answer these important questions, Peter Higgins, Audra King, and April Shaw maintain that we first must answer the more basic question, "What is Poverty?" They claim that many common understandings of poverty are inadequate because the empirical data built on those understandings fail to accurately represent who is poor, and who is getting poorer. Rather than arguing for a conception of poverty as falling below some standardized income level, they argue for a conception of poverty as the deprivation of certain human capabilities. On their view, a person is poor if, for any reason, she is unable to do certain things or achieve certain ends. A person's social position relative to social relations of power (including but not limited to those of gender) influences how effectively she can access and use resources and thus meet her basic needs.

The third section of the book focuses on persons and states. All feminists will easily agree that women's rights as human beings should be granted and protected. But what conception of human rights best promotes gender equity and combats women's oppression? Alyssa R. Bernstein examines two influential theories of human rights: the approach taken by John Rawls in *The Law of Peoples* (1999) and the capabilities approach taken by Martha Nussbaum in *Frontiers of Justice* (2006). She argues that both of these theories are valuable and that they are more compatible with each other than they first appear to be. As a result, both can and should be used to combat oppression and to respect and secure women's rights.

In the next chapter, Serena Parekh draws on Hannah Arendt's theories about statelessness and rightlessness to help explain why human rights as traditionally construed fail to treat gender-specific harms to women as human rights violations. She argues that, like stateless people, women are perceived and treated according to a biological given and, consequently, are not viewed as fully human and as able to make legitimate claims to human rights.

Rebecca Whisnant draws on a tradition of radical feminist thinking about women's bodily (especially sexual) sovereignty in an effort to articulate a liberatory conception of the importance and the limits of national sover-

eignty. Using illustrations from both contemporary pornography and contemporary international relations, she argues that although the sovereignty of both bodies and nations remain vital tools for challenging patriarchy and imperialism, the sovereignty claims of nations should be regarded as having a temporary and provisional status.

The final section of the book offers feminist perspectives on how best to respond to political and religious conflict. Joan Tronto focuses on "peace-keeping," which is generally taken to involve military humanitarian interventions, but which she thinks should be more broadly and comprehensively construed. Pointing out that the idea of a "right to intervene" is increasingly being supplanted by that of a "responsibility to protect," she contends that the latter concept—especially when elaborated and informed by a feminist ethic of care—can enable more humane and effective responses to the needs of people in war-torn nations.

Bat-Ami Bar On examines the role of terror in the ethical and epistemological formation of identity. Intrigued by Hegel's suggestion of a connection between terror, freedom, and truth, she nonetheless finds both his version of this connection and those of later authors such as Fanon and Willett to be lacking in important ways. Taking care to avoid both male-identification and excessive individualism in her own thinking, she concludes that an important avenue to freedom and truth is found not necessarily in terror or violence *per se*, but in various manifestations of existential and embodied courage.

In the book's final chapter, Lynne S. Arnault analyzes the emotion of disgust, and the extraordinary success of the New Christian Right in using moralized disgust to promote its political agenda. That success may tempt feminists and progressives also to employ moralized disgust in the service of our global political aims. In particular, she addresses whether it would be an appropriate moral response to either the types of abuses and cruelties perpetrated at Abu Ghraib prison or the practices of genital cutting found within certain non-Western cultures. Arnault concludes, however, that because moralized disgust is inexorably linked to desires for purity, domination, and univocality, the mobilization of disgust-reactions is unsuitable for advancing liberatory causes and resisting oppression.

These authors' commitments to the well-being of women and their communities run deep and are informed by a rich variety of feminist philosophical perspectives. Global in their scope and diverse in their themes, the essays in this volume will both energize readers to address the problems and issues discussed, and arm them with some important theoretical resources for doing so.