



The Network 'Women Living Under Muslim Laws': Strengthening local struggles through cross-boundary networking

CASSANDRA BALCHIN *ABSTRACT* *Cassandra Balchin argues that globalization has facilitated the growth of identity politics as well as a transnational feminist response. The international network of information, solidarity and support, Women Living Under Muslim Laws, links groups and individuals in Muslim countries and communities in order to strengthen their local struggles and individual women's pursuit of autonomy. Its cross-boundary sharing of the lived experience of women, and the diversities and similarities of these experiences, has crystallized new ways of thinking around culture, identity and women's rights among networkers and their allies beyond Muslim countries and communities.*

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Strengthening local struggles

We live in an age of unprecedented global movement – of capital, commodities, information and people – with the result that we face what Featherstone aptly calls 'a certain amount of category turmoil', where 'relatively established taxonomies, canons and symbolic hierarchies' are decentralized (1995: 128). Dissatisfaction with the oppressive essentialisms of identity politics and multiculturalism has led to the search for new concepts and new strategies that are more suited to the present moment.

Globalization has also led to a paradox visible in the area of culture, questions of identity and transnational movements. This paradox has particularly important implications for women's collective mobilization around their human rights and around how they bring about positive change in their communities.

On the one hand, globalization has facilitated the growth of identity politics that are linking up and mutually reinforcing each other not only across geographical boundaries but also across ethnic and religious boundaries – even

while seeking to reinforce these boundaries to their own advantage. For example, politico-religious groups in Pakistan receive financial backing and policy input from Iran and Saudi Arabia. At the same time the strengthening of Hindu communalism in neighbouring India boosts their claim that 'Islam is under threat' – both phenomena being a reaction to the increasing global hegemony of modernity. Such a situation has made it possible for politico-religious groups to advocate (at times even through violence against women) the position that to be a 'true' Pakistani Muslim and thereby distinguish herself from Indians and non-Muslims, a woman should veil. That the form of veiling prescribed is invariably not traditional to the particular community is simply another manifestation of the trans-cultural and a-historical identity being imposed through this globalized political space.

On the other hand, globalization has also strengthened the emergence of transnational feminist networks such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws. WLUML uses the globalized space to link women across multiple boundaries and challenge the rise of identity politics at various levels: from the family right through to the global, recognizing that the denial of women's autonomy and imposition of a particular identity at one level directly affects and is affected by women's lived experience at another.

WLUML

The WLUML network emerged in the mid-1980s in response to the need to break the isolation of women's struggles in Muslim countries and communities particularly, in the face of rising identity politics. It links Muslims and non-Muslims, believers and atheists, secularists and those who work from within the framework of religion, members of minority and majority communities, those living in developing and developed countries. Despite this diversity, the commonality is that their lives 'are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws, both written and unwritten, drawn from interpretations of the Qur'an tied up with local traditions' (WLUML, undated).

WLUML simultaneously recognizes diversity and universals. Its growing documentation of the

variety of attitudes, practices and laws found within Muslim countries and communities explodes the myth of one homogenous Muslim world and the immutability of 'Muslim laws'. At the same time networkers all face imposed identities that limit their access to basic human rights – a very universal problem. The reality of WLUML networkers' positioning, therefore, offers a textured alternative to the strictures of universalism and political paralysis of post-structuralist particularism. In the process WLUML has had to address issues of identity and culture as a retort to essentializing discourses. These take the shape of identity politics and fundamentalism in networkers' local contexts, and of multiculturalism and cultural relativism in the context of the global women's movement.

Since WLUML's inception, a main focus has been to challenge the religious fundamentalisms¹ that arose out of identity politics as the new 'internationale' and one of the earliest manifestations of globalization. As Pettman (1999: 217) points out, transnational power demands – and produces – transnational resistance. Within this very global context, the network has from the outset emphasized the need to strengthen women's local struggles and individual women's pursuit of autonomy. In the lived experience of women in Muslim countries and communities, women's bodies and the home have been two major sites defining their political struggles. Hence, WLUML has networked around issues such as dress codes, alternative sexualities, FGM, honour crimes, rape as a war crime, family laws, reproductive health and domestic violence. In each it has insisted that the manipulation of religion and tradition (albeit in very varied forms) as a means of justifying control by those who pursue identity politics (Helie-Lucas, 1990) makes such issues a matter of public political struggle.

Issues and women's groups that were invisibilized in mainstream politics have increasingly become part of public discourse. In Mali, the Philippines, South Africa and the Palestinian national authority where personal law reforms are currently under discussion at the official level, groups are using their linkages through WLUML to access alternative visions of justice for women in

family laws and strengthen their ability to promote this vision. In the Gambia the work of local groups addressing FGM has been strengthened through linkages with WLUML, specifically empowering them to critically respond to the claim that the practice is a religious requirement. In both the areas of reproductive rights and women's rights within the family, the horizontal, cross-border sharing of very localized experience and analysis through the network has enabled women to disentangle the complex threads of religion, custom and law. WLUML has also taken an active part in the Tokyo Tribunal (Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery) and the Women's Caucus at the International Criminal Court, both raising the issue of accountability and impunity at the international level.

Yet at the conceptual level none of these activities is compartmentalized – even though the principle of autonomy means many groups and individuals linked through WLUML may only be involved in a limited range of network activities. The network's collectively formulated *1997 Dhaka Plan of Action* (WLUML, 1999), its current policy and strategy document, highlights the intricate inter-relationship between the themes of fundamentalisms, militarization and sexuality. Shared across the network through publications, the ongoing circulation of information, personalized e-mail networking and the WLUML website, this perspective has crystallized new ways of thinking around culture, identity and women's rights among networkers and their allies beyond Muslim countries and communities.

Strategies for social transformation

Face-to-face interaction has also been a central WLUML strategy, designed to cross the barriers erected by identity politics. These boundaries can deny women as a whole the possibility of even dreaming of an alternative reality (WLUML, 1986) and lead even feminists to universalize the particular form of oppression they suffer. Confined to the local context, women lack the comparisons that enrich analysis, making it difficult to unravel – and then challenge – religion, nationalism, ethnicity

and custom. WLUML's foundational document, the *1986 Aramon Plan of Action*, notes that the division between public and private spheres plays a critical role in controlling women. It also argues for focusing on the private as an area of enormous potential change: '... unlike the differences that may separate us, similarities often relate to the private and personal domain. Thus for us sharing experiences ... is not a question of just creating links and solidarity but an integral part of our struggle' (WLUML, 1986).

Women Living Under Muslim Laws' structure, principles and strategic method mark it out as a very different form of transnational movement that explicitly seeks to undermine the principles and operational methods behind transnational politico-religious movements. In the process, it has joined other feminists in developing an entirely new form of politics that is simultaneously local and global.

Where WLUML is placed

The uniqueness of WLUML's structure is evidenced by some of the challenges it faces at both the internal and external levels and the very vocabulary it uses to describe its various structures.

Newly linked networkers find it difficult not to refer to 'members' although WLUML explicitly rejects such a term as implying monolithic action, uniformity of strategy, and very rigid boundaries between who is 'in' and who is 'out'. Funders who support the network's activities frequently demand a 'head count' of networkers or even of the number of women 'stakeholders'. However, who is 'in' and who is 'out' depends on the particular activity in question; for example, only a small number are involved in activities around feminist reinterpretations of the Qur'an, while the Women and Law in the Muslim World programme involved action-research teams in some two dozen countries. Moreover, as each networking group or individual invariably networks with other groups in their own contexts, bringing a two-way flow of information from and to WLUML, should one also count the women and men in these local groups as 'in' the network? 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.

Despite this structural fluidity, a Core Group exists that brings together seven women with a long-standing association with the network to ensure that its foundational principles remain intact. Further, 13 women and men who have taken responsibility for ensuring that the Plan of Action is implemented – to 'make things happen' – form a Programme Implementation Council. This is the group that necessarily has a greater say than average networkers in deciding the network's direction, but which is also expected to be able to respond immediately at the policy level to rapidly evolving situations, in particular during solidarity actions and alerts for action. The network does not have 'head offices' handing down policy and determining activities, but coordination offices whose role is to facilitate two-way linkages and the sharing of information, solidarity and support according to networkers' collective and individual needs.² Guaranteeing that all these structures do not come to dominate the network remains a constant challenge.

Finally, the WLUML does not slot easily into either of the categories of dominant network or oppositional network/meshwork. It is undoubtedly closer to the latter in that it is composed of heterogeneous, oppositional groups and individuals who voluntarily link up together, their shared activities depending upon a collective analysis of the given historical moment informed by local needs. But at the same time the dynamics of receiving international funding can sometimes push it unwittingly towards taking on dominant network characteristics.³

WLUML recognizes that knowledge is situated and reproduced in specific places by particular people and at a specific historical moment. It therefore insists on the autonomy of linked groups and individuals in terms of choosing appropriate strategies and emphasizes the rootedness of women's struggles. At the same time, it insists that

all struggles are interlinked and thus seeks to cross boundaries and build bridges both within a particular context and between contexts. BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights (the Africa–Middle East co-ordination office) has conducted bridge-building dialogues between Muslim and Christian communities in Nigeria, while the network as a whole interacts with groups such as Catholics for a Free Choice, The Centre for Women's Global Leadership, the India-based Communalism Combat, Women in Black and Women Against Fundamentalism, as well as individual progressive feminists in the European and American women's and human rights movements.

Challenges also arise out of this insistence on autonomy. The various groups linked through the network concentrate to varying degrees on WLUML themes (for example, some may not work at all on militarization) and pursue differing strategies. Perceptions of what WLUML is 'about' can thus depend upon which networking group is chanced upon or what WLUML's current focus of activities is. Frequently, it is perceived as being 'too religious' or 'too secular', depending upon the perspective of the new contact and their network point of contact. Although various network documents clarify the issue (Shaheed, 1994; WLUML, 1999), first impressions around such a contentious issue can determine whether or not a new contact pursues the linkage. The issue of representation is thus extremely important. While WLUML resists notions of hierarchy and insists upon autonomy, this does not extend to the question of 'speaking for' the network. The 'right' to represent WLUML is available only to those who other networkers trust to accurately reflect the network's internal diversity, who elicit collective positions and who routinely engage in feedback. Who decides who has this 'right' and how the network deals with those who assume representation for themselves are not easy questions.

WLUML activities

WLUML's specific activities take place in a context that obstructs women's struggles at both the global and local levels. Women's role as the repositories, reproducers and gatekeepers of the cultural and

national collectivity (Yuval-Davis, 1997) makes women who challenge this imposed identity vulnerable to charges that they are traitors to the nation, the community and the religion. Thus, while the network responds to international alerts for action circulated from outside Muslim countries and communities, it prioritizes those initiated by networking groups and individuals. This is in the belief that pressure from within the Muslim world carries greater legitimacy and weight in that it directly undermines the claim that challenges to oppression of local women are 'western inspired' and therefore to be dismissed. In recent years there have been alerts for Egypt (Nawal el-Saadawi charged with apostasy), India (gay rights campaigner imprisoned), Iran (women's rights activists imprisoned), Israel (appointment of Israeli war criminal as ambassador to Denmark), Mauritius (anti-dissent laws being passed), Morocco (women's activists threatened by state and non-state bodies), Nigeria (flogging under Sharia laws of raped girl), Pakistan (women's right to choice in marriage; blasphemy laws), Turkey (threatened reintroduction of virginity testing; civil code reform campaign), and the United Nations (Security Council Resolution 1373 on terrorism). Even where these alerts have not achieved their immediate objective, they have effectively demonstrated to both local and international audiences the vitality, unity and rootedness of women's struggles in Muslim countries and communities.

Although WLUML uses aspects of globalization (notably communications and information technologies and the possibility of networking rapidly across boundaries) to facilitate the strengthening of

local struggles and individual women's autonomy, globalization and globalist discourses can at times obscure the continued local and highly specific nature of women's oppression. Assumptions, even by well-meaning but essentially racist sections of the global feminist movement (let alone by the global media, multilateral development agencies, bilateral development agencies and international NGOs), that all women in Muslim countries and communities are oppressed in equal ways and measure are extremely problematic.⁴ They deny us agency, obscure or silence our struggles, conflate religion and custom, prevent an effective analysis of the local and global structures of oppression, and hinder the building of effective local and global alliances.

It was in this context that WLUML decided to take a visible and active part in the UN development conferences of the 1990s. While this enabled many networkers to bring their diverse place-based issues to an international forum, it was ironical that for WLUML as a *network* the ensuing visibility has in some instances led to expectations that it can act as the monolithic 'voice of Muslim women'.

The rapid growth (both spread and depth) of the network in the 1990s led to an awareness of the need to constantly re-assess activities in the light of networkers' real needs, irrespective of donor fashions, and to continue a two-way (local-global-local) flow of information. Most recently, these have led to the restructuring and relocation of the WLUML international coordination office in order to ensure that the network remains at the cutting edge of the struggle to create alternative spaces for women's collective political struggles.

Notes

1 Though the use of the term 'fundamentalism' has been debated within WLUML for many years (some of us do not use the term; others find that it is the most widely understood and least objectionable term to name the phenomenon being addressed), we are in agreement about the broad nature of the phenomenon,

i.e. the use of religion (and, often, ethnicity and culture as well) to gain and mobilize political power (WLUML, 1999: 8-9).

2 The International Co-ordination Office is situated in London, while the Asia Regional Office is located in the Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre, Lahore, Pakistan, and the Africa and Middle East Office is located in

BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights in Lagos, Nigeria.

3 The study of transnational movements is still in its infancy and has tended to focus on diasporic or ethnicity-based identity politics. See Featherstone (1995); Brah (1996); Norval (1996); and Pieterse (1996). Only recently has there been an examination of feminist

transnational networking. See Keck and Sikkink (1998); Harcourt (1999); and Eschle, (2001). While it may be tempting to see transnational networks as homogenous, their relationship to the structures of power, their positions on social stratification and particularly the discourses they access with reference to culture, identity and gender can be vastly different.

4 This is not to deny that feminists even within Muslim countries and communities can be guilty of such essentialism, although the weakness of their analysis rarely permits them to become an effective force in women's local political struggles.

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