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"Speaking Truth to Power" in Transnational Feminist History

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The moments in the history of Transnational Feminism that I find most compelling are those in which women from a variety of cultures can be found "speaking truth to power," a favorite US progressive concept first advocated by the Religious Society of Friends in the 1950s ("Speak Truth to Power"). Given the dominance of women from the United States, Great Britain, northern and western Europe, and the "neo-Europes" of Australia and Canada in the transnational women's organizations that flourished from the late nineteenth century through the Second World War, it is not surprising that women from other parts of the world had to fight against feminist orientalist assumptions about a whole range of issues, from the very nature of feminism to the impact of global power dynamics on organizing across national borders (Zonana; Weber, "Unveiling"; Melman; Lewis). Although the context has changed, many of the struggles within the three transnational women's organizations I researched for my book, *Worlds of Women*, remain powerfully present today (Rupp). If we listen to the voices of women who challenged the power dynamics within transnational women's organizations in the past, perhaps we can think more productively about Transnational Feminism in the present.

When the organizers of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) congress in 1932 invited a Chinese woman living in Berlin, Chiyin Chen, to come to Grenoble and address the congress briefly in Chinese, she was offended. Responding in German, she pointed out that she could not take the time to "speak for a few minutes in a language that probably all of the congress participants could not understand." She found this an "unreasonable demand that I cannot reconcile with my self-respect" (Chen). This was speaking truth to power, laying bare the difference between diversity as window-dressing and a real commitment to the inclusion of women from outside the Euro American world. Only since the Second World War have the congresses of the International Council

of Women, the International Alliance of Women, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom ventured outside the United States and North America. When the Alliance met in İstanbul in 1935, the move was lauded as a significant shift to the East. The president of the Union of Turkish Women pointed out that İstanbul was, in fact at "the junction of two continents," so the location represented a symbolic union of East and West (Bekir). The importance of holding conferences in diverse locations around the world, so that those without resources to travel might attend, and also providing translation into multiple languages, is a given within Transnational Feminism today. This is why the United Nations world conferences on women and their associated gatherings of non-governmental organizations met in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995), and why conferences in the global South attract more diverse participants.

At the 1935 İstanbul congress, an unnamed Arab woman explained that "the economic and political situation of my country is so desperate that it is extremely difficult for us women to give our whole-hearted energies to the cause of feminism alone" ("Delegates and Friends"). This was speaking truth to power, foreshadowing the kind of intersectional feminism advocated by scholars such as Chandra Mohanty (Mohanty, Russo and Torres). The Arab woman's statement suggested that the dominant understanding of feminism was that it addressed only the rights of women, while other ideologies and movements sought to fight imperialism, win national independence, and attain economic security. This is what Francisca de Haan, in her work on the Women's International Democratic Federation, the progressive and left-feminist organization founded in Paris in 1945, critiques as the concept of "gender-only feminism" (de Haan; Withuis; Laville; Garner; Pojmann). De Haan takes to task not only the mainstream transnational women's organizations, but scholars of Transnational Feminism, myself included, as well. That is, she argues that groups such as the WIDF should be considered part of Transnational Feminism and that the WIDF's multi-issue feminism and intersectional approach give lie to the idea that gender-only feminism is the most advanced or the only true form of feminism. While I agree entirely that WIDF is an important part of the story of Transnational Feminism, I think that until after the Second World War, in the transnational arena, feminism *was* conceptualized almost entirely as focusing on gender equality. This is not to say that

there were no transnational feminists committed to social justice — there were many, particularly in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. As the world situation deteriorated in the 1930s, with the onset of the Depression, the rise of fascism, and the beginnings of the global conflagration, more and more women in transnational women's organizations would have agreed with the Arab woman that it was "extremely difficult for us women to give our whole-hearted energies to the cause of feminism alone." However, that very phrase sets feminism apart from other ideologies and movements.

Also at the İstanbul congress, Shareefeh Hamid Ali of India, on behalf of "we of the East," warned "you of the West that any arrogant assumption of superiority or of patronage on the part of Europe or America, any undue pressure of enforcement of religion or government or of trade or economic 'spheres of influence' will alienate Asia and Africa and with it the womanhood of Asia and Africa" (Ali). Two years later, at the WILPF congress, she denounced the pretext that imperial powers civilized backward peoples as "hypocritical and wrong." "Ethiopians might as well some day pretend to go and civilize Italy, or China to civilize Japan. The civilization of peoples in Africa and Asia may be different from the European, but it has the same right of existence as that of Europe" (Minutes, WILPF). Hers was an especially powerful voice speaking truth to power, questioning the very foundation of European imperialism and, by implication, the assumption that feminism as articulated within the western tradition was free of imperialism and orientalism (Weber, "Between").

Hamid Ali's criticism of Western imperialism points to a persistent tension in Transnational Feminism: women from the United States and other secure and sovereign nations tended to criticize women from colonized or newly independent countries for being too nationalistic, entirely missing their own nationalist and imperialist commitments. The British president of the International Alliance of Women called Egyptian feminist Huda Sha`rawi, for example, "terrifically nationalist" for her advocacy on the part of the Muslim women of Palestine (Ashby to Catt; Sha`rawi; Badran). In response to a call for a protest against anti-Semitism at the 1939 Board meeting of the International Alliance, Sha`rawi pointed out that Muslims, too, suffered grave indignities and that "the Arab women sharply resent that the Alliance would not come to their aid in protesting the injustices and persecutions that they suffer in Palestine" (Minutes [French]).

A similar conflict over nationalism erupted in 1937 when WILPF considered admitting a new Egyptian section. Because of the terms of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, which called for, among other things, occupation by the British until Egypt could defend the Suez Canal, the Egyptian WILPF section supported the formation of an Egyptian national army. Alice Jacot, the Egyptian representative, made clear that they could not accept disarmament until Egypt had the capability to defend itself and that only the complete independence of Egypt, which necessitated an army, would make peace and disarmament possible. "The great imperialist powers […] have often abused their state sovereignty to conduct an egoistic politics dangerous to peace," she asserted (Jacot to Madame). WILPF, in the end, voted to admit the section, but the incident shows that Egyptian women had a very different perspective than did women from countries with secure national identities and independence and that the Egyptian women spoke truth to power in interactions with the European leadership.

These moments within the history of Transnational Feminism resonate with the work of contemporary scholars such as Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal, and Caren Kaplan (Mohanty, Russo and Torres; Grewal and Kaplan). Listening to the voices of women speaking truth to power in the past moves us beyond the concept of a "global sisterhood" to a place where the global dynamics of power must be recognized. Rejecting feminist orientalist discourses that assume a hierarchy in which a western style of gender-only feminism will raise the consciousness of oppressed women, we can work toward a truly intersectional Transnational Feminism.

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