
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unpacking Transnational Feminism: A Journey Through Its Nuances and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Transnational feminism offers a nuanced approach to understanding gender justice by examining the intersection of global power structures, race, class, and gender across national borders. It challenges the dominance of Western feminist discourses by highlighting the diverse experiences of women, particularly from the Global South, and critiques global systems like neoliberalism, imperialism, and patriarchy. Central to transnational feminism, its focus is on global solidarity and the recognition of interconnectedness of struggles for gender justice worldwide. It emphasizes the importance of addressing both local and global dynamics in feminist activism, ensuring that marginalized voices are heard. Relying on a qualitative explorative study through close examination of scholarly articles, this article will shed light on the complexities of transnational feminism. While the movement seeks to constantly balance the tension between fostering global solidarity and respecting local complexities as well as aims to dismantle hierarchies, it can sometimes reproduce the same power imbalances it critiques, particularly between feminists from the Global North and the Global South. The challenge of translating theoretical ideals into practice, especially in terms of equitable representation and collaboration across borders, adds further layers of complexity to transnational feminist work.

KEYWORDS

Transnational feminism, global power structures, interconnectedness, gender justice, Global South, Global North, global solidarity, local complexities

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1. Introduction

The rise of transnational feminism in the late 20th century marked a pivotal moment in feminist discourse. It brought a refreshing shift from homogenized narratives to a celebration of the diverse, interconnected experiences of women across the globe. As globalization expanded its reach, feminists found new challenges and opportunities to explore solidarity in ways that honored both local and global realities. As discussed by Moghadam (2015): « The scale and scope of transnational feminist activism since 1995, has been a product of globalization. A complex, multidimensional process whereby the mobility of capital, peoples, discourses, products, and organizations takes on an increasingly transnational or global character, globalization has economic, political, cultural, technological, and geographic aspects ». In addition, Nagar and Swarr, 2010 (in Kurtis and Adam, 2015) state that : « Beyond mere recognition of differences in women's experience, transnational feminisms further note the extent to which such differences and existing power asymmetries among women are interconnected via historical legacies of imperialism and current practices of globalization that (re)produce (neo)colonial relations of domination and subordination".

Moghadam (2015) provides a detailed description of transnational feminism activism: “as one of the distinguishing features of globalization from below, which has challenged the masculinized hegemony of business and political elites. Transnational feminism takes place on a number of levels (global, regional, local); addresses political, policy, and normative issues within global and local spaces” (p.53). Unlike earlier iterations of feminism that often centered the experiences of Western women, transnational feminism prioritizes intersectionality, diverse lived experiences, and the interplay between local and global contexts (Mason, 2017).

By criticizing prevalent power systems and focusing on the disparities created by political, global and economic structures, transnational feminism Provides a complex view of grasping and fighting against gender-based segregation. It also stresses on the significance of acknowledging the differences between women, as well as the diverse ways in which sexuality, class, race and geopolitical location interconnect to shape their lives. Transnational feminism highlights the need to construct feminist practices and theories within the limits of pre-determined historical and cultural certainties, nurturing a more an all-encompassing and unbiased feminist movement (Kurtiş & Adams, 2015).

To understand the complexities of transnational feminism approach, this article will examine its theoretical fundamentals, practical strategies, and the setback it encounters in developing broad and equitable feminist cohesions. Examining the core foundations, key principles, and everlasting discussions, will allow this article to showcase the transformative potential of transnational feminism in tackling the multi-layered nature of gender inequality in an ever interconnected world.

2. Literature Review

Transnational feminism: Historical Foundations

The rise of Third World feminism, in the 1980s, challenged the shortcomings of Western-centric structures, bringing together pioneers such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga to the forefront of the discussion. These scholars focused on showcasing that second-wave feminism often ignored the connections between colonial history, class and race. Their efforts paved the way for what would later develop into transnational feminism—an approach that honors inclusivity whilst aiming for unity. This specific transition led to moving from previous paradigms, namely global feminism, which advocated for a “global sisterhood” that more often than not bypassed certain historical and cultural contexts of non-Western women (Harcourt & Baksh, 2015).

The shift from global to transnational feminism demonstrated an apparent refusal of universalist ideals of patriarchy and solidarity. As discussed by Tung (2013), the universal vision of unity that global feminism so glorified further emphasized the significance of embedding paternalism and cultural imperialism leading to the need to develop a new structure/model that took into account the nuances of power dynamics between and within nations. Supporting this, is Desai (2007) who indicates that the newly developed framework was crafted by subaltern and postcolonial theories, which stressed on the interconnectedness of gender, class, race, and colonial past in shaping women’s experiences.

Transnational Feminism: Definition

Looking at transnational feminism’s core principle, Mason (2017) specifies that it deals primarily with the linkages between gender inequality and the larger segregation systems, such as colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberal globalization. Contrary to global feminism that is based on the universalist experiences of patriarchal oppression, the transnational feminism approach, looks at globalization as one of the major obstacles facing women, taking into account their geographical and social locations (Parekh & Wilcox, 2018). Not only this, but is also distinguished by its commitment to intersectionality, interdisciplinarity, and reflexivity, allowing feminists to have the opportunity to examine and challenge forcefully the global power dynamics whilst respecting local perspectives (Enns et al., 2021).

In addition, transnational feminism focuses on criticizing the standardization of women’s experiences and the inclination to look at non-Western women as victims in need of rescue from “backward” patriarchal societies (Kurtiş & Adams, 2015). Responding to this tendency, transnational feminism seeks to strengthen the voices of women from marginalized communities, stressing their agency and resistance in the face of diverse forms of oppression. This approach seeks to create solidarity without eliminating the distinctions between women’s experiences, calling for more collaboration across borders and shared political commitments (Parekh & Wilcox, 2018).

Complexities and Nuances

With regards to its main distinctive characteristics, transnational feminism does seem to display a greater sensitivity to the interconnection existent between local and global contexts. Comparing global feminism to transnational feminism, the former as depicted by Mason (2017) often promotes separate spheres for the local VS the global approach whilst transnational feminism connects them taking into consideration the interconnectedness between local histories and global considerations. Supporting this is Naples (2002) in Mason (2017) who argues that using transnational as a term highlights the interrelations between the local and global aspects of life.

Transnational feminism also deals with the difficulties that are created between theory and practice. Several scholars highlight the significance of working towards the liberation of feminist knowledge and practices, while at the same time, critiquing western-oriented frameworks that govern academic and activist spaces (Enns et al., 2021). Indeed, adopting reflexivity and positionality, and promoting egalitarian collaborations seeking to prioritize women's perspectives from the Global South and other marginalized groups is highly important. As stipulated by Hernandez-Wolfe & Acevedo (2020), transnational feminism's role in this regard is to go beyond what is referred to as "global sisterhood" and focus more on creating strategies that embrace contextual specifics.

Transnational feminist networks or (TFNs) also adds to the complexity of transnational feminism as an approach. These particular feminist networks resort to mobilizing women throughout the world to deal with a number of matters pertinent to reproductive rights, gender-based violence and neoliberal economic policies (Moghadam, 2015). TFNs are considered to be vital when it comes to going beyond local solidarity, and including global solidarities. In fact, they are created for the purpose of demanding a balanced power since without it obstacles facing women would persist. Being accused of the NGO-ization of transnational feminism is also another crucial area when examining this approach. In general, several western-oriented have been accused of that particularly because they seem to bring their westernized ideals that are specific to their countries and try to apply strategies probably beneficial for them, on women coming from marginalized groups. Desai (2007) supports this, by specifying that indeed linking NGOs and transnational feminism creates a favorable environment for the reproduction of gender inequality as well as removing the focus from grassroots organizations to donor-driven ideals.

Implications for Global Gender Justice

Transnational feminism presents an influential framework in terms of examining the complexities of the inequalities that influence women's lives worldwide. By underlining the connections between colonial histories, gender, class and race, it offers a complex understanding of how globalization spreads injustice while at the same time creates opportunities for feminist resistance. This approach does in fact criticize the unequal labor practices of the global assembly line while supporting for fair trade and worker-owned cooperatives (Parekh & Wilcox, 2018).

Furthermore, transnational feminism's commitment to decolonization contests prevalent forms of knowledge production and demands for alternate approaches rooted in the lived experiences of alienated women. This focus on reflexivity and positionality affirm that feminist movement continues to be not only accountable and inclusive, but also solidary without obliterating differences (Enns et al., 2021).

3. Methodology

To examine closely the nuances and complexities of transnational feminism, it is important to rely on an explorative qualitative approach. Using a selection of articles will not only help to analyze the data gathered from literature, but also introduce a comprehensive insight that combines theory and practice.

4. Results and Discussion

This following section is divided into two sub-sections, results and discussion as the section title indicates.

a. Results:

Examining the literature helped identify the key elements apparent in the transnational feminism approach. These elements or aspects depicts a move from a global and universalist approach to an intersectional one. One that deals with global discrepancies without forgetting the local particularities, but at the same time, keeping in mind the importance of linking theory and practice.

Theory as the guiding principle and practice as its clear application on the ground. An aspect that is important in all fields and not only in the humanities.

In both of their articles, Tung (2013) and Harcourt & Baksh, 2015, transnational feminism is shown as an approach that strives to move beyond the global and universal that seeks to eliminate the particular and local histories and encourages more the intersectionality between local and global without omitting the specifics and histories of each one.

Enns et al (2021), highlight the fact that transnational feminism approach recognizes the significance of the interconnectedness between class, race and gender inequality. These three aspects are looked at wholistically and focusing on one without the forgetting the others. Reflexivity also appears to be central to this approach. It does in fact enrich it by encouraging feminists, activists and scholars alike, to assess their inherent biases.

The third important characteristic of transnational feminism is that it advocates for grassroots activism to break free of the shackles of colonization. The focus here is particular to the transnational feminism's efforts in terms of challenging the NGO-ization of feminist activism that as described previously takes from the tireless work done by grassroots organization that are more close and more familiar with the difficulties faced by women (Desai, 2007; Kurtiş & Adams, 2015).

The fourth aspect is the impact created by the transnational feminist networks or TFNs. They basically stand out in the face of gender inequality while dealing with the hurdles created by neoliberal globalization. Their main target is promoting women's rights through different means. As specified by Moghaddam (2015), they resort to advocacy, community-based activity organization and income-generating projects. Each organization rely on particular activity or strategy that is tailored to the needs of the women in particular and the community (local) in general.

The study of the literature also helps demonstrates that globalization continues to affect women differently. Women in marginalized communities (especially the ones belonging to the Global South), have been impacted negatively the most. Parekh & Wilcox, 2018, indicates that within these societies, transnational feminism approach strives to confronting unfair labor systems to work towards more equal solutions; this aspect is mostly apparent in worker-owned cooperatives and initiatives.

b. Discussion

This section will particularly synthesize the findings that sought to show transnational feminism as not only an approach, but also as a social change seeking movement. This approach has several strengths starting with its ability to link between the local and the global while taking into account the particularity of each without omitting the importance of creating an environment favorable for gender justice.

Starting with intersectionality as it is a core principle of transnational feminism, and distinctive feature that distinguishes it from other approaches and theoretical frameworks. As stated by Mason (2017) and Enns et al (2021), examining the interconnection between class, race and gender provides clearer view of the effects of neoliberal policies and colonial histories on women belonging to marginalized groups.

The review of the literature also showed that transnational feminism is committed to challenging westernized narratives that has been widely prevalent in the feminist activism discourse. This goes to show that giving marginalized women the opportunity to elevate their voices and talk about their experiences while including positionality and reflexivity is crucial and the same goes for the efforts done by scholars and activists in this regard (Hernandez-Wolfe & Acevedo, 2020).

It is also important to note that transnational feminism has long been fighting to challenge the obstacles faced by women, which can be depicted in the power disparities within the TFNs as well as the feminist movements resistance against their NGO-ization. These issues are discussed by both Desi (2007) and Moghaddam (2015) who showcase that they can affect negatively the efforts done by grassroot organizations vis-à-vis the strategies created by donor-driven agencies. Adding to this, transnational feminism faces the political and cultural consequences of globalization. As the latter pushes for exploitative labor practices and unfair resources distribution amplifying gender disparities. Fair trade alternatives and cooperatives can be presented a solution to this issue.

5. Conclusion

Transnational feminism' roots are embedded in criticizing the westernized approaches and dealing with the complex intersections of globalization and gender inequality. By strengthening diverse standpoints and challenging power imbalances both within and

between nations, it serves as a powerful framework for globally promoting gender justice. Regardless of the obstacles encountered, namely, navigating discriminatory power dynamics and the increasing NGO-ization of feminist activism, its focus remains on unity, self-reflection, and decolonization. In a globalized world, transnational feminism does seem to continue to adapt to diverse hurdles requiring it to enlarge its scope to cover newly addressed issues such as climate change, the rise of authoritarianism and digital disparity. Integrating transnational feminism values into policies and practice, is also key as it will help it maintain its impact and significance, not only this, but it will also be considered as an indispensable guide when it comes to having a more inclusive and equitable future.

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