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Exploring Feminism Globally to Achieve Global Feminism

ANNA M. HAN*

Edited Speech delivered on October 6, 2000 at the University of San Diego Journal of Contemporary Legal Issues Conference on Intersectionality and Critical Race Feminism.

When Professor Wiggins first called to invite me to speak at this conference, my first response was “But I teach business law!” She nevertheless asked me to come. So, why would a law professor who specializes in business organizations, international trade and investment and technology licensing be talking about and writing about global feminism?

Much of my interest in global feminism began when I attended 1995 Women’s Conference in Beijing. I was a part of a legal delegation of women from the Bar Association of San Francisco that consisted of one judge, one academic and a number of practitioners.

I was overwhelmed at first by the vast diversity of the women in Beijing. When I looked out at any function, I saw a sea of faces that truly mirror our globe and many groups came from countries that are traditionally at odds. There were women from Israel and Palestine, from India and Pakistan, China and Tibet and there were Serbs and Croats.

There was a woman from the island nation of Tonga, who complained about the loss of the young people of her island to more “modern” and developed countries. She was worried that soon only the old would be left on the island with no one to carry on the traditions of her culture. There was a woman from China, the most populous of countries, who complained of how overpopulation had led to a one child policy, forcing her to continually abort her other pregnancies. She was concerned about who would support her in her old age. The differences between these women in terms of the size, social structure and political and economical conditions of their respective countries as well as their individual concerns seem vast and insurmountable. However, the longer I listened

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to the issues presented by these women from around the world, the more I was struck by the similarities in their themes and these are what I would like to address.

Our group presented several workshops at the NGO conference. Surprisingly, although our topics centered on law, our audience, which consisted of women from all-around world, was 99 percent non-lawyers. What was truly amazing to me was the number of stories that were shared in these workshops and how, even though the stories originated from countries as different as Sri Lanka and Norway, some consistent themes emerged.

As my interest in issues affecting women deepened, I agreed to contribute a chapter to Prof. Wing's anthology, *Global Critical Race Feminism*. Basing my writing on what I know best, I proceeded to explore the status of Chinese women under China's changing economic policies. My article (reprinted in this journal), was designed to explore whether or not the newfound prosperity of China's economic policy was benefiting its female citizens equally. It should come as no surprise that not only are women not benefiting equally, Chinese women are losing many of the gains that they made socially, politically and economically under communist rule during the last 50 years.

In writing this article, I kept thinking of the various stories that I heard during the workshops in Beijing and again I was struck by the commonality of the underlying issues facing women from around the world. While there may be dramatic political, cultural, linguistic and economic differences, I posit that there were more similarities than there were differences.

One criticism that is often levied at any discourse concerning international women's issues is that the discussions are often framed from a western and developed country centered perspective. I hope to show, by stories from the women themselves, that the common concerns transcend apparent differences. I believe that the tellers' status support the validity of their stories.

One of the workshops conducted in Beijing concerned sexual harassment in the workplace. In my article, I discuss how this is becoming a problem in China. In United States, our discussions often focus on issues involving suggestive posters, inappropriate jokes and other acts that create a hostile work environment for women. I was surprised to learn how other women from around the world were dealing with the same problem.

One Norwegian woman recounted the story of how she struggled to become included in a deep sea fishing crew. The traditionally male field excluded her by refusing to provide toilet facilities on-board the ship.

The term “pissing in the wind” had both a metaphoric and very literal meaning for her.

A woman from Sri Lanka described the conditions for women tea pickers on the tea plantations. Tea picking is a day job and the foreman selects workers from a group of women each morning. In order to be selected, the foreman expected the women workers to have sex with him. If a woman refused, she was not selected to work on the plantation. Women who did not secure work often faced beatings from their fathers or husbands for failing to bring back a day’s wage. Their choice was between rape and a beating. Recent news stories illustrate how sexual harassment is a problem not only for under-educated, poor tea pickers but for Olympic runners as well.

A Japanese professor from a well-known university shared a story of a male professor who harassed a colleague and several female students; it was the women who were told to leave the university. The reason offered was that the male professor “only” kissed them. Education level, income, and the country’s level of development do not seem to affect how women are being treated in the workplace.

While these stories differ greatly regarding the severity of the problems in the work place, there is a common theme of women trying to make a living on equal terms.

For further confirmation of these similar stories, I asked several women studying for their LLM degrees at Santa Clara to meet and discuss issues of concern to women in their respective countries. I wanted to be sure that there have not been any significant changes since 1995. These women represented countries as different as India, Israel, Brazil, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Japan and Great Britain. They are all women that one might term “privileged” within each of their societies. They are already lawyers and many achieved that status in countries that are not traditionally accepting of women in law. What was revealing was that each one of them had her own story to tell of discrimination or harassment from inappropriate jokes to requests to take unnecessary business trips. One woman told me that she originally planned to say that her country did not discriminate, but upon reflection, she could recall a great number of both personal encounters and stories she had heard that contradicted this claim.

EDUCATION/EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

One presentation by our group in Beijing was a discussion about the

glass ceiling within the legal profession of the United States. Statistics bear out that while an equal number of women and men enter law school, graduate and pass the bar, and enter into private practice within large firms, the partners of larger firms are still predominantly men. The numbers are equally dismal when looking at the number of women judges, particularly in the federal circuits. More recently, the ABA Report on Women indicated that while some improvements have occurred for women in the legal profession, not enough changes have been made to level the playing field.

While this discussion may have seemed remote to the issues facing many of the women attending that workshop, some interesting themes again began to emerge. There were numerous stories that served to illustrate and confirm the existence of the same exact problem in every field of work and from around the world. A policewoman from Coraceu explained that in her society, no matter how long she works or how hard she works, she would probably never achieve the position of police chief. Immediately, several policewomen from Germany echoed her concerns. Some women from the Middle East wondered why we were even complaining because most women in their countries are not allowed to work outside of the home at all.

Advancement in the workplace is even less certain when educational opportunities for women are so frequently at risk. In my article about China, I demonstrate that when education is neither compulsory nor free, families are often called upon to choose which child will receive an education. In China, families are choosing their sons over their daughters. Factories are hiring men over women to avoid paying for maternity leave and health care that the women are entitled to by law. Women law graduates go jobless in China because the firms think they will marry and have a child. The same is happening in rural areas of India and Vietnam. One of my LLM students told me that women are asked to sign contracts in Vietnam promising that they will not marry or have a child during the contract term before they are hired. "Public" companies that are government owned are the primary advocates and implementers of this policy. In Japan, most companies have a general track and a management track. Ninety-eight percent of women hired by large corporations are on the general track. These women are not expected to advance and they are not expected to stay on the job after they marry or have a child. In Iran, the illiteracy rates among women and girls remain high, preventing them from accessing the higher paying jobs.

It seems that even when women are as qualified as men, they must still struggle to advance, sometimes at the expense of personal choices.

SAFETY AND HEALTH

Here in United States, one of the major issues affecting women is domestic violence. This issue also cuts across national boundaries. In some countries such as China, there is a growing problem of not just domestic violence, but abduction of women into forced marriages and prostitution.

In the Philippines, families worry about what happens to the thousands of women domestics who go abroad to earn a living. They are frequently raped or otherwise abused by their employers. Some have been killed.

In other countries, such as Bosnia, rape has been used as an instrument of war. In certain Middle Eastern countries, death at the hand of a male relative because the woman has somehow dishonored the family is a real danger.

On the issue of health care, a key concern of women in the U.S. is the lack coverage for treatment and drugs for "women's illnesses." For other women, issues regarding health care are more basic. Many of them wonder if they will ever receive prenatal care from a trained medical person. They wonder if their children will receive any neonatal care or ever see a dentist. In Africa, the fear centers on the spread of AIDS and the lack of drugs for HIV treatment. In countries such as Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia, 50 percent of pregnant women in urban areas are infected with HIV. Unless something is done, overall life expectancy in southern Africa will drop from 59 years to 45 years. In both Africa and Asia, women are the fastest growing group of HIV infected patients. Access to health care is yet another issue common to all women. While many of their issues can differ, women around the world all want to be safe and healthy.

As I explore the conditions of women in China, in the United States and around the world, I see great differences but also great similarities. No matter what the stage of economic development, what the religion or race, women want to be safe, have adequate health care, and to have the opportunity to earn a living under equitable conditions.

The purpose of sharing these stories with you is to urge all of you to continue to explore these themes in your writing. I truly believe that similarities should be further explored while taking note of the differences. Writings by those of you who are the true experts in this field will continue to promote the notion that women's rights are human rights and that what affects women in one country affects women around the world. I look forward to the other speakers and attendees of this

symposium taking up this challenge. By exploring feminism globally, perhaps we will achieve global feminism.