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Introduction: Feminism and Globalization: The Impact of the Global Economy on Women and Feminist Theory Symposium

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Introduction:
Feminism and Globalization: The Impact of the Global Economy on Women and Feminist Theory

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The Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies is a scholarly forum for communication and exchange among the many research agendas that involve the concept of globalization. Each year the Journal sponsors a major symposium highlighting specific intersections of these provocative and growing areas of research.1 This year’s conference, Feminism and Globalization: The Impact of the Global Economy on Women and Feminist Theory, focuses on the intersection of global market forces and feminism.

A number of important questions gave rise to this topic. One set of questions addressed the economic, legal, and political status of women in the emerging global economy. As the drive for economic growth takes hold around the world as “globalization,” what is its impact on new entrants into the labor force, particularly women? What role do women play in the global economy? Within the United States, are women subject to the kinds of legal protections that evolved in earlier periods of labor and civil rights law? Do new flexible production processes undercut such legal protections? As the role of women expands in industries that dominate the global economy, does their political power increase proportionately?

Another set of questions emerged from feminist debates about equality and difference. How do these debates challenge globalization theorists, specifically with respect to the often presumed relationship between globalization and homogenization? Addressing the social processes (economic, legal, political, cultural, etc.) that connect women’s lives and consciousnesses in new ways around the world also opens new terrains for

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1. This is the fourth symposium this Journal has published since it began. The Journal has previously published symposia dealing with the Globalization of Law, Politics and Markets (Fall 1993); Migration and Globalization (Fall 1994); and International Environmental Laws and Agencies: The Next Generation (Fall 1995). In the Fall of 1997, the Journal will be publishing a symposium entitled The Public’s Health in the Global Era: Challenges, Responses, and Responsibilities.
feminist dialogue. In addition to questions involving the impact of the global economy on women, we also were interested in the ways in which feminist theory might respond to these changes around the world. How do different feminisms frame and assess the conditions of globalization around the world? Does globalization open spaces for new women’s movements? Is it meaningful to conceptualize rights for women as universal in nature? To what extent are strategies for reform limited or enhanced by cultural differences? What are reactions to and the likely impact of the Platform for Action set forth in the Fourth Conference on Women held in 1995 in Beijing?

The papers in this conference address these and other important related themes and questions. The three lead papers are by Professors Saskia Sassen, Zillah Eisenstein and Aihwa Ong—each of them major theorists at intersections of economy, democracy, and feminism. Each of these papers is followed by at least one and, in some instances, two commentaries. Taken as a whole, these papers and comments begin to create an intellectual framework for exploring further the mutual impact of women’s participation in the global economy and feminist theory.

Professor Saskia Sassen’s paper, Toward A Feminist Analytics of the Global Economy, lays the foundation for this emerging framework of analysis by exploring the transformative effects of the global economy on the State and suggesting ways in which a feminist analytics of the global economy might be developed, one that would enable us to go beyond simple comparisons of the economic conditions of women and men in different countries. To accomplish this, it is important for Sassen that we fully understand how different the nation-state is today, given the forces of globalization. Territoriality and sovereignty no longer mean what they once did. Territoriality is now being unbundled, most noticeably in what Sassen describes as global cities, so that many operations crucial to the global economy increasingly occur in a denationalized way. Similarly, the idea that the State is the only site for sovereignty also no longer holds true. There are other sites as well, and actors other than States that also play crucial roles in the global economy.

Understanding the transformative effects of globalization on the nation-state is, however, only one aspect of developing a feminist analytics of the global economy. We also need a deeper understanding of globalization itself, a new narrative, as Sassen suggests. The current narrative of globalization emphasizes hypermobility, global communications, and “placelessness,” but
it fails to take account of the fact that the global economy must depend upon work done in particular places by particular human beings who live there and enable the global economy to flourish. Professor Sassen’s analysis recaptures the geography of place involved in globalization, thus encouraging us to focus on the people, workers, communities, and the different work cultures, besides the corporate culture, involved in the work of globalization. Herein lie the ways in which we can begin to assess more fully the impact of the global economy on women and determine its gendered aspects.

Professor Gracia Clark’s commentary, Implications of Global Polarization for Feminist Work, builds on what she describes as Professor Sassen’s “chilling picture of the global elite of managers and consultants” who have so much influence and hold so much power and income in the global economy. As Professor Clark points out, the mirror image of the unmarked global elite is represented by secretaries, waiters, and other occupations that disproportionately include individuals of marked gender, racial, and ethnic categories. The challenge, as Professor Clark sees it from Sassen’s work, is to create clear and convincing alternatives for revalorization and reconceptualization in local accountability. Specifically, Professor Clark asks “how can women from . . . disparate social, cultural and economic locations reinforce each other’s efforts to regain control of the global economy?”

In his commentary on Professor Sassen’s paper, Professor Kenneth Dau-Schmidt focuses on some perennial problems that women have faced in the local, national, and global economy. He notes that in general, women have never fared as well as men when it comes to dividing up the surplus derived from cooperative economic and social relationships, no matter what level of the economy we are speaking of. He notes that with globalization, it is possible that the global economy will provide women with more opportunities and limit the extent to which they can be exploited in bargaining relationships. In his view, however, it remains unclear whether this will ultimately result in women improving their lot. To the extent that globalization undermines the role of the nation-state and renders regulation more difficult, government cannot play as effective a role as necessary in ensuring equal bargaining relationships between men and women. It may also be difficult for government to ameliorate the harshest outcomes of the employment process such as exploitation and discrimination.
Zillah Eisenstein’s paper, *STOP STOMPING ON THE REST OF US: Retrieving Publicness From The Privatization of the Globe*, explores the relationship of globalization and privatization and the impact increasing privatization has on women. Specifically, Professor Eisenstein explores the implications of seeing globalization only as a set of economic processes which create what she calls a “myth of oneness,” and asking us to see the world as “one village of freely competing parts.” She argues that the politics of privatization that this encourages undermines any constructive role for the State by minimizing the idea of the public interest and any kind of public role for the state. Eisenstein goes on to argue that the dynamic of the politics of privatization reinforces gendered hierarchies. The end result is the continual displacement of women’s priorities and needs to the bottom of the goals of the global marketplace.

Professor Eisenstein sees feminism as offering some hope for revitalizing the “realness” of the public. Specifically, she sees the Platform For Action put forth at the Fourth Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 as an important starting point for imagining a world that is not dominated by the privatization of public responsibility. The demand for the creation of sexual equality for women around the world requires governmental participation and a “different kind of democracy than has ever been theorized or practiced before.” Indeed, from the dialogues among the feminisms across the globe represented in Beijing, Eisenstein finds hope in a “revitalized notion of publicness for the twenty-first century.”

While all of the authors in this symposium generally agree on the overall negative effects of globalization on women, there is less agreement over how best to address these issues on a global basis. For Professor Eisenstein, the Beijing Conference offers an excellent starting point for reform. Professor Ong, as we shall see below, critiques the assumptions behind what she calls “strategic sisterhood.”

In her response to Professor Eisenstein, Professor Susan Williams also argues for a feminist revisioning of the public that will help us respond to the harmful effects of globalization. In so doing, however, Professor Williams argues that the traditional concept of the public is not adequate as a basis from which to respond effectively to the threats of privatization in the global world. Feminists, she notes, have largely rejected the public/private distinction on which those conceptions rest. She articulates a new feminist vision of the
public as being a commitment to shared responsibility for our collective lives, exercised through democratic participatory mechanisms. Professor Williams argues that such a conception of the public provides a foundation from which to resist the damaging forms of privatization that globalization seems to encourage.

In *Strategic Sisterhood Or Sisters In Solidarity? Questions Of Communitarianism and Citizenship In Asia*, Professor Aihwa Ong is highly critical of the proposals set forth by the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Specifically, Professor Ong critiques the concept of strategic sisterhood that she sees developing among Western/Northern feminists. She argues that the notion of sisterhood that emerged from the Beijing Conference is based on individualistic ideas of transnational feminine citizenship, and that these ideas ignore historical and cultural differences between women from the First and Third Worlds. In addition, she notes that the concept of strategic sisterhood fails to come to grips with other forms of morality, whether they are expressed as nationalist ideology or embedded in religious practices. These other forms of morality also shape local notions and relations of gender and must be taken seriously.

Professor Ong then focuses on China, Indonesia, and Malaysia where popular struggles for human rights are usually couched in terms of community, such as class, religion, or nation, rather than in gender terms. She believes that the answer to some of the negative effects of globalization is not a single international sisterhood, but rather the possibility of many negotiable and partial collaborations between feminists in different countries. In short, she opts for what she calls a “weak universal of female emancipation” in a global network of participation, resistance and reform.

In her response, entitled *As The World (Or Dare I Say The Globe?) Turns: Feminism And Transnationalism*, Professor Fedwa Malti-Douglas asks: What does it mean to say that someone is a Western feminist? In so doing, she questions the utility of a dichotomy between Western and non-Western feminists, particularly when, as she notes, “the discourses on women and gender, at least in the Middle East and North Africa, are not so unidirectional.” She finds similarities in the kinds of problems faced by women in the Middle East and North Africa, though their discourses are moderated, as she notes, by a religious discourse which cannot be escaped. Professor Malti-Douglas goes on to call for a transnational feminist discourse, one which is nuanced and
complex enough to take into account the many different contexts in which feminist issues and problems present themselves.\textsuperscript{2}

All of these articles and the commentaries that follow them raise important issues and contribute in important ways to the literatures on feminism and globalization. We also hope the papers in this symposium will generate a continuing dialogue in the pages of this \textit{Journal} on the issues raised here, issues which go to the heart of our conceptions of globalization and the role of the State.

\textsuperscript{2} Professor Leslye Obiora's comment on Professor Ong's paper will be published as an Article in the 1997 Spring issue of the \textit{Journal}. 