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Strategic Sisterhood
or Sisters In Solidarity?
Questions of Communitarianism and
Citizenship in Asia

AIHWA ONG*

The Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995) has spawned a triumphant sense among Western/Northern feminists that they are forging a strategic sisterhood with less privileged women in the South. Feminists from metropolitan countries seek a new North-South alliance whereby they make strategic interventions on behalf of third world women by putting pressure on their governments. Professor Ong critiques strategic sisterhood on the following grounds:

First, strategic sisterhood is based on individualistic notions of transnational feminine citizenship, ignoring the historical and cultural differences between women from the first and third worlds. In particular, the concept ignores geopolitical inequalities whereby postcolonial countries are sensitive to what they view as new forms of cultural imperialism. For many Asian leaders and subjects, women's emancipation is seldom just a question about individual rights, but fundamentally about culture, community, and the nation.

Second, strategic sisterhood brushes aside other forms of morality—whether expressed in nationalist ideology, or embedded in religious and communal practices—that shape local notions and relations of gender, hierarchy, loyalty, and social security. These webs of power relations are the everyday contexts within which third world women must struggle for their rights.

To illustrate both points, Professor Ong draws on cases from China, Indonesia, and Malaysia, where popular struggles for human rights are usually couched in terms of community—class, religion, or nation—not gender. The silence regarding women's problems is especially striking in resurgent labor movements where a significant proportion of workers are young women working in abysmal conditions. Foreign feminists must first understand the

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conditions shaped by communitarian ideologies—produced by ruling regimes, labor, or religious elites—within which most third world women must negotiate their rights and self-identity. Professor Ong presents the example of Muslim feminists in Malaysia struggling for women’s rights, not by forming strategic partnerships with Western feminists (a strategy guaranteed to fail), but by engaging local men in (re)defining gender rights within the framework of Islamic morality, nation, and civilization. The struggles of these courageous women deserve respect from Western feminists who are ever-ready to dismiss any accommodations with Islam or non-Western moral ethos. After all, feminism and women’s rights only make sense in terms of the imagined communities within which people live and, through their embeddedness in local social relations and cultural norms, decide what is good and worthwhile in their lives.

Globalization thus produces not a single international sisterhood (dominated by Western feminist ideals and agents) but many possible, negotiable, and partial collaborations between feminists in different countries. Feminist sisterhoods are strategic when they can create a transnational public that does not exclude the variety of alternative visions of female citizenship framed within alternative political moralities. Strategic sisterhood will be most effective when it adheres to such a “weak” universal of female emancipation.
I. STRATEGIC SISTERHOOD?

The Fourth World Conference on Women held in China has ended, and there is a sense of triumph among many feminists as they head for home. There is pride that gender gaps in economic power, property rights, and poverty have been put on the world’s agenda, and the message, “macro-development is a feminist issue” has been sounded loud and clear. Bina Agarwal, an Indian economist, declares that:

Many Northern women today are finding common ground with Southern women on economic issues, and wanting to be part of commonly-defined strategies, including agitating against transnational corporations.

This is not to argue that the North-South gap has disappeared. But among women's groups there is growing recognition of the importance of forging strategic links. One could say “romantic sisterhood” is giving way to strategic sisterhood for confronting the global crisis of economy and polity.¹

Strategic sisterhood is a new transnational and transcultural strategy to confront the entangled issues of globalization and women’s rights. Globalization, in the sense of the intensified capitalist integration of the world, has spurred feminists to seek their own global strategy to fight for women’s rights bypassed or trampled in the rush to economic development. The term strategic sisterhood implies a contingent North-South feminist partnership for intervention in different countries where the gender gap is pervasive, but it also suggests a transnational notion of citizenship for all women, regardless of their economic, cultural, or national differences. Thus, Agarwal argues that the energy coming from the Beijing Platform will help Indian feminists challenge their government to put its “money and political backing where its words are.”² As citizens both of their own countries and of a transnational feminist public, feminists can draw on their international alliances to hold their own governments to account.

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2. *Id.*
Yet a lacuna remains in this strategic sisterhood idea, one that is based on democratic principles of citizenship, and that does not take into account the varied cultural circumstances within which people live their lives. For decades now, feminist nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), mainly through meetings sponsored by the United Nations, have disseminated democratic principles of citizenship to women throughout the world. Drawing on Kantian democratic liberalism, their notions of citizenship are conceptualized in absolute, universalistic terms of freedom and equality, regardless of differences in historical and cultural experiences, not the least of which is colonialism. While ideals of social equality for all human beings are difficult to fault, we need to ask how these messages will be received in places that have emerged from Western colonial domination and are just now forging their own postcolonial identities and destiny. Thus mantras from the North like “women’s rights are human rights” may be received rather differently in developing countries sensitive to any signs of the imposition of Western cultural norms on the world. Northern feminists and many of their elite Southern counterparts often skirt the issue of how to bring about improvements in women’s conditions without being seen as the new imperialists. In order to do this, they must be more sensitive to imperialist logic in their exchanges with women in postcolonial societies and become aware that their perception of themselves as autonomous individuals depends on their “liberation” of oppressed sisters in the third world.  

There are, for instance, two issues that strategic sisterhood needs to take into account: nationalism and political moralities in postcolonial countries. First, whereas in the Western/Northern-dominated discourses, women’s rights are based simply on the notion of individual autonomy, in postcolonial Asian countries like India, women and the home represent “the original site on which the hegemonic project of nationalism was launched.”  

Outsiders talking about

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3. Aihwa Ong, *Colonialism and Modernity: Feminist Re-presentations of Women in Non-Western Societies*, 3/4 INSCRIPTIONS (1988) (I argued that First World feminists defined themselves in opposition not to First World men, but to Third World women, who are viewed as their social inferiors. We cannot talk about gender inequality in non-Western countries without situating our analyses in the context of cultural imperialism and geopolitical ranking of nations in the world.)

4. In this essay, I will be using the terms “Western” and “Northern,” on the one hand, and “Southern” and “non-Western” interchangeably. They refer not so much to absolutely fixed geographical relations as to the relations of political and economic inequalities in the world stemming from colonialism, imperialism, uneven capitalist development, and contemporary market forces.

women's rights are tampering with "the inner spaces of community," and thus "the life of the nation." Thus, for Asian leaders and their citizens, women's emancipation is never just about individual rights, but fundamentally about culture, community, and the nation. These issues are especially potent at the historical juncture when many postcolonial countries are finally emerging as economic competitors to the West, and they are especially sensitive to having a women's rights ideology imposed from the West.

Consider, for instance, the comments of two female leaders who represent North-South perspectives from two vastly different points of departure. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, speaking as a representative of the confident world power, declared at the Beijing Conference: "What we are learning around the world is that, if women are healthy and educated, their families will flourish. If women are free from violence, their families will flourish. If women have a chance to work and earn as full and equal partners in society, their families will flourish." In contrast, Mine. Huang Qizao, vice-president of the All-China Women's Federation, said:

The founding of the People's Republic of China ended the thousands of years of feudal oppression and enslavement of women and the country's history of being trampled and bullied by foreign aggressors. . . . As you all know, China is a developing country. Barriers still exist to achieving equality in women's participation in political affairs, employment, education, and marriage. Therefore there is still a long way to go on women's emancipation and development.

Whereas Clinton sees the answer to women's emancipation in the freedom of women, Huang considers the fight for women's emancipation within the Chinese struggle with colonial domination. Clinton focuses on individual rights, Huang on the right to self-determination for the country. However,

6. Id.
7. Talking about struggles over gender meaning in Malaysia, I argued, "The twists and turns in gender contestations show vividly that gender politics are seldom merely about gender; they represent and crystallize nationwide struggles over a crisis of cultural identity, development, class formation, and the changing kind of imagined community that are envisioned." ONG, supra note 3, at 86.
8. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, Remarks for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China (Sept. 5, 1995).
the North-South tensions go beyond different starting points that view women's problems in terms of individual rights or in terms of the nation. The contemporary geopolitical distribution of power enables Clinton to position herself as speaking for women all over the world, while Huang confines herself to speaking only for women in her own country, a strategy that implicitly rejects the right of Northerners to dictate universal prescriptions. As speaker for an emerging global power, Huang is asserting her country's claim to deal with their women's question in their own way, within other national agendas of development and collective security. This conflict over strategies—whether gender inequality is best fought at the global level, or must be struggled for within the particular historical, cultural and political circumstances of each country—is something that strategic sisterhood glosses over.

Feminist NGOs appear to have two major strategies regarding women's rights. One is to formulate norms of gender equality that are universally applicable; the other is to put pressures on particular governments to protect women's interests and rights within their own borders. Much of the approach is narrowly legalistic, and the focus has been on macro-level interventions. Insufficient attention has been paid to cultural differences and sensibilities which are critical for any reform to work without coercion in our complex multinational world. We need anthropologists as much as lawyers to do the work of understanding and promoting women's rights. Anthropologists and feminists have been very sensitive to Western tendencies of "othering" whereby we obtain our sense of being liberated late twentieth century subjects from defining others, especially women from the Third World, as backward and oppressed traditional subjects. We are acutely aware of the need to understand gender problems within the context of competing problems in developing countries, and to be mindful of global inequalities between cultures and nations that cause Third World societies to be sensitive to metropolitan reform and intervention.


11. Ong, supra note 3, at 85.
Western feminists, whether academic or activist, are often seen as working in collaboration with the imperialist hegemonies of Northern countries. For instance, Northern feminists at the Beijing Conference represented themselves as enlightened and liberated subjects with the answers to the problems of women in non-Western cultures. When delegations from Catholic and Muslim countries sought to define “separate but equal” identities for women that would assure their rights while preserving distinctive male and female social roles, they were dubbed “traditional” and marginalized by liberal feminists who dominated the NGO meetings. A more fruitful stance would have yielded truly transnational exchanges whereby both sides learned more about the details of each other’s societies and the ways women’s agencies are engendered and shaped in particular webs of power.

A second issue that strategic sisterhood needs to recognize, beyond the tensions between the “civilizing” logic of Western feminists and the postcolonial resistances of feminists from the Third World, is the basic differences in notions about political morality, a term that has been defined as “a set of moral arguments about the justification of political action and political institutions.” For Northern feminists, women’s rights have their basis in Western liberal ideals of moral independence, the individual right and capacity to make moral judgments about the value of goals and projects that constitute the good life. Ronald Dworkin argues that liberal political theory, from which Western feminism is derived, operates from an “abstracted egalitarian plateau” according to which “the interests of the members of a community matter, and matter equally.” This fundamental egalitarianism requires that the government treat all individuals as equals, in order to ensure conditions for each individual to make moral decisions about their goals in life, as well as to have the right to change them. Liberal feminism, as expressed in international forums, is fundamentally about women’s rights as individual rights with men in their society and in the global economy. Although this is a basic twentieth century ideal, North-South conflict erupts when liberal feminists disregard alternative political moralities that shape the ways women in other societies make moral judgments about their interests and goals in life, and use other cultural criteria about what it means to be female and human.

13. Id. at 184 (citing Ronald Dworkin, In Defense of Equality, 1 SOC. PHIL. AND POL’Y 24).
As feminists seek to form sisterly links and collaborations around the world, we should pause often and ask ourselves, "Whose ‘imagined communities’ are we dealing with?"\(^{14}\) When we think about globalization, and the pressing problems affecting women and children globally, we are tempted to brush aside other social imaginaries that do not view women’s rights in quite the same way.\(^{15}\) It will be important to attend to how discourses of community, development, and gender are negotiated in a particular society. Such ideological discourses are "an exercise in symbolic power,"\(^{16}\) whether at the national or transnational level; they set the terms in which debates about citizenship and society proceed.

In Asian countries, colonial and postcolonial struggles have been based on national ideologies of community, and any discussion of the women’s issue is always framed in terms of collective interests. These narratives construct different levels of control, regulation, and power that position women as well as shape their agency. We need to understand, for example, how a national discourse of community is able to negotiate with subaltern ones "on its own terms for the purposes of producing consent."\(^{17}\) Below, I discuss the moral philosophies of some Asian elites, who maintain that political morality as it governs citizenship is determined by the State. Then I consider how workers’ movements in Asia have reacted to the disruptive effects of globalization, especially the plight of millions of workers, the majority of whom are female. In both sets of narratives, political morality is couched in terms of relations between citizens and the State, and there is a complicity of silence about the special circumstances of female exploitation, many engendered by local responses to globalization. Specifically, I ask, why are certain issues of women articulated or not articulated in discourses of community when female labor plays a growing and critical role in programs of national development? I end by discussing how Muslim feminists in Malaysia, a rapidly industrializing country, are able to negotiate a space for articulating women’s rights within the discourse of Islam. Sisters-in-Islam represents the kind of

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14. The term “imagined communities” was coined by Benedict Anderson to describe social imaginaries of belonging associated with the birth of nations. BENEDET ANDERSON, IMAGINED COMMUNITIES: REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF NATIONALISM 147 (1983).
15. See Arjun Appadurai, Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy, 2 PUB. CULTURE 2, 5 (1990) (defining social imaginaries as the “constructed landscapes of collective aspirations . . . now mediated through the complex prism of modern media.”).
17. CHATTERJEE, supra note 5, at 13.
genuine, homegrown feminism of which strategic sisterhood should be more supportive.

II. THE MORAL ECONOMY OF THE STATE

“If racism is the unspoken of nation, then sexism, or sexual inequality if you will, is the unspoken of transnationalism.”18

A major result of globalization is that Asian countries are experiencing some of the highest rates of economic growth in the world. Rapid industrialization has created huge laboring populations, migrant flows, urban congestion, and class differentiation—all conditions that contribute to anxieties, social upheavals, and political unrest that can undo the very gains of development. It is perhaps not surprising that under such disruptive circumstances, governing regimes have increasingly relied upon discourses of community as structuring hegemonies to shape people’s sense of identity, belonging, and citizenship.

In countries referred to as the “mini dragons,” such as Singapore, and other rapidly industrializing “dragons,” such as Malaysia and China, the role of the State as a producer of moral meanings has intensified as development picks up speed. Every so often, leaders from these countries attend to the ritual task of claiming the distinctiveness of Asian economies and cultures.9 While most Western observers view these pronouncements about “the Asian way” as a critique of Western cultures, these visions of community must also be understood as ideological forces for disciplining society as it undergoes rapid economic development.20 These Asian narratives continually (re)construct and (re)define cultural values as the duty of citizens to discipline themselves and increase labor productivity in order to fulfill social obligations for the good of society as a whole.

19. There are different perspectives on these narratives of Asian cultural exceptionalism, but they are all linked to the emerging capitalist power of the nations concerned. See Aihwa Ong, Chinese Modernities: Narratives of Nation and Capitalism in the Asia/Pacific, in UNGROUNDING EMPIRES: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF MODERN CHINESE TRANSNATIONALISM, (Aihwa Ong and Don Nonini, eds., 1996); Mark T. Berger, Yellow Mythologies: The East Asian Miracle and Post-Cold War Capitalism, 4 POSITIONS 90 (1996); C.J. W-L. Wee, Framing the ‘New’ East Asia: Anti-Imperialist Discourse and Global Capitalism, in CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION IN ASIA (David Birch, ed., forthcoming).
20. See ONG, supra note 19; see also WEE, supra note 19.
In these narratives, issues of human rights, and implicitly, women’s rights, are constructed as social rights contingent on the political and social needs of development. Development is a top priority in State-strengthening projects as globalization makes it possible for many Asian countries to “catch up” with the West. Thus, in a variety of international forums, Asian leaders have recast the human rights debate by declaring that the right of the nation to develop is also a human right. At the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna, the Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Liu Huaqiu emphasized that for developing countries, the paramount importance of economic and social rights sets limits on individual rights:

The rights and obligations of a citizen are indivisible. While enjoying his legitimate rights and freedom, a citizen must fulfill his social responsibilities and obligations. There are no absolute individual rights and freedom. . . . Nobody shall place his own rights interests [sic] above those of the state and society, nor should he be allowed to impair those of others and the general public.  

Such expressions are an instance of what I call “the moral economy of the State” in Asia, whereby the developmentalist State is ideologically presented as the authoritative regulator of social exchanges between State and citizens. James C. Scott applies the “moral economy” idea to Southeast Asian peasant society wherein unequal exchanges between patrons and peasants are morally justified. Scott claims that the agrarian moral order accepted social inequality because patrons provided crucial social and material guarantees to peasants in return for their labor, services, and loyalty. In a moral economy system, the subordinated groups perceive the unequal exchanges as collaborative and morally legitimate because they ensure security for all.

Here, I readapt Scott’s moral economy idea to describe the critical importance of a State-produced ideology that embeds notions of State-citizen relations within a moral economy ethos. I differ from Scott in that I believe


that the dominant party, in this case the State, must continually produce the cultural values to engender and sustain adherence to a moral economy ideology. Moral codes do not merely emerge from preexisting cultural norms but must be invented and reinvented by the ruling elites, both in the ritual pronouncements about Asian cultural values, and in policy mechanisms that reinforce expected citizens’ compliance and workers’ productivity. In countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and China, citizens are persuaded that their governments will guarantee economic and social well-being in return for economic discipline and social conformity. Elite narratives construct a balance of rights/freedoms and obligations/duties whereby the State ensures conditions for economic accumulation in return for tolerable constraints and selective repression of citizens’ rights.

The moral economy of the Asian State is often defined in opposition to Western liberal democracy, especially the Western liberal promotion of free speech and political opposition to the regime in power. In many cases, the moral economy is presumed to reside in the Confucian values attributed to ethnic Chinese subjects. In spelling out the features of Asian modernity, Asian elites are also reinforcing the localization of citizen-subjects. For instance, Lee Kuan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore, asks rhetorically, “Do we need the kind of free-for-all libertarianism that we see in America?” Singaporeans, he claims, do not want a loosening of the reins in their tight little republic: “[T]he majority of Chinese-Singaporeans do not want to be actively involved in political parties. It’s not in their culture. What they want is to have somebody governing them well and producing things that they want.”

The Singaporean regime has raised to a fine art the interweaving of private sentiments with public interests. Another official declares that Singapore represents the virtues of a small democracy that is buttressed by extended family networks. “No democracy can function well without strong moral

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23. Scott assumes that moral economy concepts emerge from the precarious circumstances of peasant livelihood which foster social values of reciprocity and exchanges that can help avert disaster for individual households and the community as a whole. I do not contest this view of peasant society; however, in my formulation of the moral economy of the modern Southeast Asian state, I argue that the ideology of morally justified exchanges must be continually produced and organized by the state, regardless of whether there is a pre-existing set of moral values that will support such unequal collaborations between citizens and the state.

24. ONG, supra note 19.

underpinnings supported by the entire community. In Singapore, we deliberately work our welfare policies through the family. The objective is to strengthen the family net, not weaken it. This communitarian ethos, whereby the communal values of the family are constructed as consonant with those of the State, can also be found in Taiwan, which has in recent years, enjoyed a flowering of democratic liberalization.

Taiwan is a booming country with huge foreign reserves accumulated during decades of industrialization through sub-contracting arrangements with global corporations. The glamour of the economic miracle conceals the fact that the majority of workers are underpaid or unpaid married women working in thousands of small “living-room” factories. The State and major corporations are thus relieved of the actual work of disciplining labor, and a government handbook on labor attributes Taiwan’s economic progress to “harmonious” labor-capitalist relations shaped by Chinese values. The handbook spells out a communitarian vision that differentiates between relative and absolute obligations:

The relative obligation means that one need not fulfill his obligation if the other party fails to realize his. The absolute obligation means that one is not exempt from his obligation even when the other party fails his/hers. In other words, no matter how rude or harsh the other becomes, based on the moral standards applicable to all human beings, you should still carry out whatever obligations you are supposed to carry out. The absolute obligation between the workers and capitalists is the essence of what we call the moral norms between the workers and the capitalists.

As spelled out, the workplace moral code does not distinguish between the genders, but as the majority of the factories are based on male-headed family units, one can only assume that it endorses the paternalism of these enterprises and the absolute obligations between family members. An ethnographic

29. Id. at 59.
30. Id. at 60.
investigation of these factories discovers that female labor is often recast as “helping out” relatives in return for “favors,” whereas the demands of the male boss are perceived as his rightful claiming of personal debts.\textsuperscript{31} In the Singaporean and Taiwanese elite-produced imaginaries, (Chinese) family relations are invoked as the model of binding obligations between citizens and the State on the one hand, and workers and capital on the other. Implicit in these narratives are women as the unmarked category, represented by terms like “family” and “worker” whose compliance with these “cultural norms” is critical to the social stability and economic success that are desired by the entire society.

In Asian countries not dominated by Chinese populations, the communitarian theme is cast in broader terms of Asian cultural exceptionalism, most spectacularly represented by Japan. The Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad has joined forces with Shinjaro Ishihara, author of \textit{The Japan that Can Say No}, in a new book called \textit{The Voice of Asia: Two Leaders Discuss the Coming Century}.\textsuperscript{32} In a recent interview, Mohamad notes that Asian countries have mastered the industrial skills of the West and yet retained “much of their own distinctive traditions” which will be the source of Asian independence from future domination.\textsuperscript{33} That autonomy, in Mohamad’s view, is guaranteed by “the not-so-liberal” State, because Asians believe “strong, stable governments . . . are a prerequisite for economic development.” He argues that “when citizens understand that their right to choose also involves limits and responsibilities, democracy doesn’t deteriorate into an excess of freedom . . .”\textsuperscript{34}

Criticizing the “hedonistic values” he associates with liberal individualism, Mohamad argues that what appears to the West as an undeveloped sense of self in Asia is the source of their adaptation to modern production systems.\textsuperscript{35} In other words, Asian “communitarian capitalism” is opposed to the individualistic capitalism of “the West,” which in these othering narratives is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} See generally \textit{id}.
\item \textsuperscript{32} \textsc{Mahathir bin Mohamad & Shintaro Ishihara}, \textit{The Voice of Asia: Two Leaders Discuss the Coming Century}, (Frank Baldwin trans., 1995). The Japanese version of the book has a more combative title: \textit{The Asia that Can Say No: A Policy to Combat Europe and America}.
\item \textsuperscript{33} The following discussion of Mohamad’s views was taken from excerpts that were reprinted in \textit{A Challenge from Two Asian Statesmen: Will East Beat West?}, \textsc{World Press Rev. Dec. 1995}, at 6, 8. (Containing excerpts from \textsc{Mahathir Mohamad & Shintaro Ishihara}, \textit{The Voice of Asia: Two Leaders Discuss the Coming Century}).
\item \textsuperscript{34} \textit{id} at 8 and 11.
\item \textsuperscript{35} \textit{id} at 10.
\end{itemize}
often taken as a homogenized whole, represented by the United States. Mohamad points out that, like Japan, Malaysia in the 1970s established “Malaysia Inc.,” or a government-capital alliance that requires the yoking of the public and private sectors in a way that prospers from “collaboration rather than confrontation with officialdom.” Mohamad claims that this mix of limited democracy and communitarian capitalism has been the foundation of the extraordinary growth in Asia, especially in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. These new “mini dragons” have inspired China and Vietnam to adopt a mix of strong State controls and flexible market production.

By attributing the economic success of Asian countries to values of communitarianism, Asian regimes set the terms in which debates about citizenship and women’s rights should proceed. As exercises “of symbolic power,” such ideological discourses instill discipline in the population while engendering legitimation and loyalty in the name of Asian moral values. Although these narratives arise from different locales, together they form a transnational public whereby disruptions and conflicts, caused by rapid economic development and social upheavals, are managed by the continual invention and reinvention of a public morality based on asymmetrical obligations and paternal authority. In its most extreme form, the combination of “state-fathering” and a “phallic Confucianism” ideologically ties the communitarian worker, the extended family, and the strong State together in an integrated frame of State “biopolitics,” or the processes of management and control of the population that makes it “governable.”

36. See Lester Thurow, *Communitarian vs. Individualistic Capitalism*, NEW PERSPECTIVES Q., 41, 41-44 (Winter 1992). Lester Thurow maintains that Germany and Japan share many features, such as corporate-state alliances that make their form of capitalism more “communitarian” than that found in the United States.


38. Indeed, in Asia, economic restructuring has been inseparable from the rise of strong states. For instance, Herb Feith argues that since the 1960s, throughout the Asia Pacific region, new “repressive-developmentalist regimes” have arisen in conjunction with state direction of export-oriented industrialization, the disciplining of the new workers, and the maintenance of the new technical, professional, and bureaucratic elites that manage state apparatuses and interface with transnational corporations. Herb Feith, *Repressive-Developmentalist Regimes in Asia*, 7 ALTERNATIVES 491 (1982). The close alliances between state and capital that characterize these “bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes” has charted the path to economic boom from South Korea, through Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong, the so-called Asian tigers or “mini dragons.” Id.


41. Michel Foucault, *Governmentality*, in THE FOUCALUT EFFECT: STUDIES IN GOVERNMENTALITY
In order to support women's rights in these Asian countries, Western feminists must penetrate these layers of communitarian ideologies if they hope to understand the different dynamics, ideological construction, and handling of social conflicts. Common to all these discourses about the nation, community, family, and collective security is the unspoken assumption of sexual inequality. Masculine power is the feature that provides the connection across nations and nation-states and is the hidden/covert symbolic power—a regime of truth cast in the language of family, community, and nation—that localizes and fixes female subjects in succeeding webs of power relations. Thus, narratives of Chinese fraternities and networks, worker-capitalist obligations, and State-family moral orders are ideological buttresses against citizens' restlessness and workers' disruptions that may threaten the developmentalist state.

The complicity of women in these visions must be traced to their dependence on the moral economies of the family, community, and the nation which demand, in successive layers of claims, their duties and loyalty in return for social security and cultural belonging. These familialistic regimes are a form of "symbolic violence," a term sociologist Pierre Bourdieu uses to mean the unconscious practices of intimidation euphemized both by those who dominate and those who are dominated. Thus, while female workers in wealth-making enterprises may resist coercion, after an everyday fashion, by paternalism at home or in workplaces, they are already disciplined to be communitarian workers by the moral codes that construct their services as absolute obligations to the family, the community, and the nation.

Workers at the front lines of production do not, of course, necessarily share these views of absolute claims on their labor. A report by the U.S.-based Human Rights Watch/Asia observes that: "[T]he Asian concept of human rights, stressing economic development over political rights and collective duties over individual freedoms, is largely a self-serving construct of Asian governments that has been widely rejected by Asian human rights activists." We shall see, however, that in the new Asian workers' movements, complicity with ruling ideas about community and masculine privilege minimize the recognition of gender exploitation.

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87 (Graham Burchell et al. eds., 1991).
III. ASIAN LABOR MOVEMENTS, FIGHTING BACK, OVERLOOK WOMEN'S RIGHTS

One glaring paradox of globalization is that flexible systems of finance, production, and distribution, by their ability to take advantage of different market niches and to exploit "time-space compression," leave out masses of people who have little hope of gaining access to jobs. This extraordinary power of evanescence, omission, and exclusion operates as a time-space disciplinary technology that tempers labor struggles against the runaway factories. There is a sense, especially for people from developing countries, that it is better to be "exploited" by transnational corporations than to be left out in the dustbowls of underdevelopment. Much of the South has fallen outside the new economic zones created by globalization, without access to the structures that will gain it minimally-paid jobs and the ability to buy consumer goods.

In recent years, the rise of independent labor movements in Asia has not directly challenged foreign capital or industrialization as such, but merely focused on the abysmal working conditions and low wages, circumstances against which they seek protection and guarantees from the State. Rapid industrialization in China and Indonesia has given rise to independent unions fighting appalling labor abuses and poor wages, spawning an ever increasing series of strikes and labor action that has challenged political control. Sidney Jones, the former executive director of Human Rights Watch, comments: "The labor movement is becoming the major human rights movement all across East Asia. Economic development is the source of legitimacy for many of these governments. The labor movement forces the issue of who benefits from that development."

In much of modern history, workers' movements have also been an important site of struggle for women's rights, even if female workers seldom achieve equal standing with male workers. Since women form a significant,
if not overwhelming, majority in many of the new Asian manufacturing industries, I will explore the terms of negotiations between the States and their workers, to discover whether women’s rights are presented in the imaginaries of these male-led movements.

IV. INDONESIA: LABOR PROTESTS WITHIN NATIONAL IDEOLOGY

Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world, with a population of 180 million. It is a teeming archipelago that has been transformed in recent years into an industrializing power with a nearly seven-million-strong industrial labor force, growing at the rate of two million per year. In many cases, ethnic Chinese or Koreans operate factories subcontracted with transnational corporations to produce garments, shoes, toys, watches, and other consumer goods for the world markets. Although Indonesian workers are among the lowest paid in Asia, factory operators seek to further lower wages by paying less than legal minimum wages to a largely young female labor force, or by employing children. These appalling conditions have given rise to some of the largest labor protests in Indonesia’s modern history. On the eve of the Asia-Pacific Economic Council (APEC) Summit Meeting held in November 1994, Amnesty International wrote a long report blaming the Indonesian government for “human rights violations on a staggering scale.” Although most of the violations were focused on counterinsurgency operations and political repression, there are growing violations of workers’ rights. The Indonesian government has crushed independent unions and imprisoned labor activists, including the leaders of the largest nationwide independent union, the Indonesia Welfare Labor Union (SBSI). President Suharto responded to the international outcry by admitting that certain “excesses” might have occurred as part of the development process and they must be remedied, but Indonesia could not blindly follow Western human rights “that do not conform to our national ideology.”


49. *Id.*
51. *Id.*
The ideology of suppressing independent labor movements in the interest of development was challenged by female workers like Masinah. In 1993, Masinah, a young worker at a watch factory in Surabaya, was abducted, gang-raped, and murdered for leading a strike to demand that a meal allowance of U.S. $.25 be added to the U.S. $.84 daily wage. Her age and work conditions were probably typical of the thousands upon thousands of young women working in sweatshops throughout the archipelago. For instance, in an industrial zone outside Jakarta, women work twelve hour days sewing GAP outfits, making less than $2 a day, including overtime. Thousands of young women are employed by Adidas and Nike, whose shoes cost $100-$150 a pair, but the workers take home only $1.39 a day (or are paid thirty or forty cents per pair). The average worker needs at least $2.50 per day to pay for rent, food, and transport.

Managers punish the tardy by making them stand under the sun for hours, and are quick to fire those who demand basic survival wages. Sexual harassment includes timing visits to the toilet, and using the excuse of checking menstrual leaves (which provide time off from work) to conduct bodily searches. Workers are cramped into dormitories above or next to warehouses, thus creating firetraps. Such conditions are similar in other industrial zones like the one in Medan, Sumatra, where food-producing factories are charged with employing “workers barely in their teens.” It is telling that although child labor advocates in Indonesia have protested the employment of children, there is no public articulation of gender exploitation. Instead of focusing on the age or gender of the majority of workers, the independent union SBSI has led successful nationwide strikes over the violation of the minimum wage law. The critical dimensions of exploitasi [exploitation] are viewed primarily in ethnic or communal terms. For instance, labor activists have cast their struggles in terms of ethnic exploitation, distributing leaflets urging workers to “annihilate the Chinese” managers of factories. Muslim clerics have expressed their support for SBSI, though it is not recognized by the government as part of their wider protest against labor repression.

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54. Id.
55. Goozner & Schmetzer, supra note 46, at 6.
But has Masinah, as a symbol of factory women’s courage, died in vain? Masinah’s murder provoked a national outcry, leading to some arrests. There is widespread belief that the military was involved. A labor activist notes that whenever there is a strike, the army is deployed against workers, no matter how peaceful they are. Perhaps the fight for human survival overrides consideration of gender difference in the treatment of workers. Indeed, the negotiations between jailed SBSI leaders and the government seek a State guarantee of a minimal level of income to ensure workers’ survival. Although the majority of the workers in these free trade zone enterprises are female, gender issues are not raised in what appears to be a growing cross-class, cross-ethnic conflict.

The overwhelming silence regarding women’s exploitation among labor activists perhaps reflects a desire to focus on the larger plight of all industrial workers in the country, and also embarrassment over the ways local women are treated in the country’s race toward development. The decision to articulate workers’ grievances in cultural terms of obligations between workers and their bosses, and to avoid references to gender exploitation, may also reflect attempts to shield the dignity of female workers. There is also the pervasive perception that female workers’ earnings are supplementary to family income, and perhaps young female workers do not merit special attention in the labor movement. In spite of her gang rape and murder, Masinah is hailed by labor activists as a symbol of class struggle, not of the special predicaments of female workers. But the female character of this cheapest form of factory labor is absolutely central to their exploitation as cheap labor, as many ethnographical accounts have shown. Indeed, like Masinah, female laborers are left to their own devices, often displaying a fierce agency in quietly resisting everyday exploitation. Even the little information we can glean from the occasional newspaper reports indicates that much of the daily control of female workers centers on their bodies (the provision of food, menstrual leave, family planning, and physical confinement). Sylvia Tiwon has argued that the Javanese working woman’s “articulation” is often not in speech, but in the body. Their resistances must be read in bodily gestures like averted eyes, silences, taking unauthorized menstrual leaves, and so on.

56. Wallace, supra note 52.
57. WOLF, supra note 45.
58. See generally id.; ONG, supra note 45.
These silent actions deflect and weaken the effectiveness of techniques used to discipline the female body. Women's mute bodily resistances can become, in extreme cases, the means of what Gayatri Spivak calls "strategic essentialism" to protest labor exploitation, but unions have yet to use women's difference in their struggles to secure human rights from their own governments.

It is, of course, important to remind Western feminists that when one looks closely at female employment in Third World industries, the abuses female workers suffer cannot be traced simply to local patriarchal norms, but they are elaborated upon and given new saliency when integrated with capitalist mechanisms of labor control. These techniques are often introduced through third-party nationals like South Koreans, Japanese, and yes, Americans. Strategic sisterhoods will have to confront not only cultural practices in Third World countries, but also metropolitan capitalist enterprises that are driven by profits to seek cheap female labor in the South.

V. CHINA: COLLECTIVE SECURITY FOR WORKERS?

What about China, which boasts of the existence of an All-China Women's Federation in its socialist government since 1949? In recent years, industrial strikes, labor unrest, and accidents have occurred among coal-miners, farmers, and workers laid off by State-owned enterprises. New joint venture factories that produce billions of dollars' worth of toys, clothing, and electronic goods in the booming coastal cities are not exempt from industrial accidents or worker discontent.

During my November 1993 visit to Shenzhen in south China, a fire killed eighty-four female workers in a toy factory. They were prevented from escaping by doors and windows barred to prevent stealing. A month later, sixty-one textile workers were killed in another factory blaze set by a dismissed worker in Fuzhou, up the coast. I turned on the television and read the local papers to discover local reactions to the tragedies. There was a lot of talk about not blaming the foreign factory owners for fear of discouraging foreign investments, and some blaming of corrupt factory inspectors for not

enforcing rules against barred windows and overcrowding in storage areas. Hardly any mention was made of the female workers who died; in any case, many were migrants from poorer provinces and their identities were snuffed out along with their lives.

In the aftermath of the fire, Guangdong province, home to thousands of sweatshop factories, drafted a new law that would ban locating workshops, dormitories, and storage areas together, the so-called “three-in-one” factories common throughout the Pearl River delta industrial zone. On paper were laws that mandate a five and one-half day work week and ban child labor and forced overtime; foreign-backed joint ventures are also required to have labor unions. Leaders of the workers' movement are skeptical whether the rules will ever be enforced, since their violations are a feature of everyday life in the joint ventures. It was only a year later, as the Chinese government geared up for the United Nations Conference on Women, that a special State-sponsored investigation was conducted on the plight of female workers in the Shanghai special economic zone. It discovered forced overtime, up to 137 hours a month, and widespread discrimination against married and pregnant women. The investigative team called for tougher license requirements to protect female workers, and for accelerating union formation. Labor leaders consider these State expressions of concern about female workers as window dressing to impress foreign observers gathered at the Beijing women's conference. Indeed, a young woman in a Guangdong factory, who makes about 250 yuan a month (or less than one U.S. cent per pair of jeans she stitches), says, “In private companies, you know, the workers don’t have rights.”

The government is ever-ready to crack down on independent unions not attached to the All-China Federation of Trade Unions. The top leaders of the newly formed League for the Protection of Workers' Rights were arrested after they announced plans to form a nationwide movement. China, like Indonesia, fears that independent unions will become the basis of Polish-style Solidarity movements that can challenge the State. But what are the visions of these

62. See id. at 5.
64. 137 hours per month works out to roughly fourteen hour workdays, over a five and one-half day work week.
66. Brauchli & Kahn, supra note 61, at 5.
independent unions, in which human rights activists have invested so much hope, for protecting women's rights?

In two petitions sent to the National People's Congress in early 1994, independent labor movements frame their appeals in terms of social justice whereby "state power must be subjected to the control of powerful citizens' rights and activities." The first document states:

> Scattered individual rights behavior is inadequate for the effective supervision of state power. Only collective citizen rights activities can effectively resist the abuses of state power by certain officials. Associations representing the interests of different social strata established according to law constitute a prerequisite for exercising legitimate collective citizen rights activities.

The reiteration of "collective citizen rights" disavows any notion of liberal individualism, conceiving of human rights in terms of collective guarantees for certified "social strata" such as peasants and workers (but not women?) in society. The second statement, by the League for the Protection of the Rights of the Working People, carefully distinguishes its vision of social rights from that of the elites:

> The political value orientation of the Chinese intellectual class is pro-democracy, and the working class and peasantry are all the more pro-social justice. The League will integrate these two tendencies and make social justice and political democracy its goals. It will recruit large numbers of members from among the workers, peasants, and intellectuals, so as to enhance its strength and make preparations for future social change.

Again, the citizens' rights focus is on State protection of different sectors of society as a whole, not individual rights. Although women's rights as a category has existed throughout the history of Communist rule in China, in the visions of the new labor movements in post-Maoist China, it does not appear

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68. Id. at 7.
69. Id. at 10.
to be a significant issue that needs collective protection. This is a very disturbing oversight under the conditions of market reform, euphemistically referred to as "socialism with Chinese characteristics." To characterize this set of labor demands as "political pluralism," as does Human Rights Watch/Asia, is to obscure the fact that independent labor unions are not demanding absolute liberal rights, or attending to the rights of diverse groups including women and minorities. The ultimate goal of the petition is to uphold "the centrality of socialist market economic construction and reform and openness, actively explore the social security system that would fully protect the working people's rights and make them still more complete." Gender difference is obliterated in this demand for collective social security and the responsibility of the State to working people as a whole.

We should not be surprised, then, that for many working women in China's coastal cities, exposure to values associated with rampant capitalism and consumerism has made individualism very alluring. More compelling than labor unions or workplace activism may be the bars and karaoke lounges that have sprouted up in China's changing urbanscape. As I have discussed elsewhere, young working women may spend their leisure hours in these bars, seeking freedom from the oppressive conditions of capitalist workplaces and from the State contamination or containment of labor politics. By taking their lives into their own hands, and by seeking to disembodied themselves from the prior claims of a series of moral economies (family, community, workplace, the nation), they hope to find a way to leave China, usually as a mistress or wife of an overseas Chinese man. The dazzling world of freewheeling overseas Chinese capitalism beckons, with its promise of romance and individual freedom to choose one's interests and goals in life. Ironically, by seeking release from their families and other social support systems, they are all the more exposed to the fluid and flexible modes of sexual exploitation represented by overseas tourists and businessmen. Such experiences of individual freedom skate perilously close to Western notions of liberal individualism, and may indeed account for the skepticism many in Asia feel towards Western liberal values.

70. See id. at 1.
71. Id. at 11.
It is clear that in both China and Indonesia, hopes vested in independent labor movements as the sites for the articulation of women’s rights, either in collective or in individual terms, have yet to be realized. The visions instead express notions of public morality that are framed by reciprocity, obligations, and guarantees of basic survival between State and citizens. The imaginations of these movements are not fired by workers’ exploitation as women (or men) so much as by the kind of abuses and injustices that threaten the overall livelihood of the laboring poor.

The challenge to feminist theory, then, is to uncover the dynamics of a “cultural citizenship”—processes whereby subjects are self-making and being-made in webs of power relations that define how and where they belong in a nation-state—that is, embedded in moral economies of the State and culture. Because gender hierarchy is at once the building block and basis of such public moralities, attempts to intervene on behalf of women must be framed within the normative constructs of the public moralities in these societies. It is especially important, given the perilous links between the destructive aspects of individualism and the notions of women’s rights, that feminists disentangle their concerns from the hegemonic discourse of the market and articulate their cause in ways consonant with the moralistic terms of the society concerned.

VI. CONCLUSION: SISTERS IN THE INTERPRETATION OF PUBLIC MORALITY

We have seen that in the imaginaries of independent labor movements in Indonesia and China, workers’ rights are framed not in some absolute abstract notions of individual rights, but in terms of moral duties and obligations between State and citizens. I suggest that for women’s rights to gain an audience in Asian societies, their concerns must also be articulated within a moral discourse of communitarianism. By shifting their focus from the law and rights to a focus on the cultural construction of public morality, Western feminists can better appreciate the ways local feminists are negotiating for gender reform in their countries. Indeed, for feminist interventions to be effective, strategic sisterhood must mean not only feminist collaborations formed to put pressure on governments to abide by international standards of women’s rights, but more basically, a sisterhood with men in interpreting and

formulating public morality in their own culture. Sisters in Islam, a feminist
group that is renegotiating gender relations in Malaysia, represents an
instructive example for Western feminist theory.

Malaysia is a rapidly industrializing country of less than 20 million people,
the majority of whom are Muslims, like their counterparts in Indonesia.
Export-oriented industries employ tens of thousands of young peasant women,
whose labor has made Malaysia the world’s largest producer of disk drives and
microchips, and helped spawn a growing Malay middle class. While labor
conditions are rarely as bad as those in Indonesia, over the years, there have
been protests—over low wages, work conditions, and labor controls—in the
form of strikes, slow-downs, and individual modes of resistance, such as
attacks on machines and spirit possession incidents that disrupt production.

My research among Malay female workers convinces me that we must
understand how gender inequality becomes interwoven with class exploitation,
and that local cultural norms, foreign cultural practices, and capitalist
instrumentality all play a role in constructing gender hierarchies in these free
trade zones. In a review of the literature on female industrial workers created
by globalization, I suggest that in order to pierce elite and male silences over
female exploitation, we must analyze the ways women and men struggle over
cultural meanings that structure their lives. This observation has been borne
out by the Sisters in Islam, a group of Western-educated feminists who seek
to change gender relations, not by employing Western feminist theory, but by
developing a voice in reinterpreting the key texts in Islam. They combine the
liberal tradition of creative questioning and revisioning with the Islamic
tradition of authoritative interpretation of the Qur’an, the hadith, and the
sunna. This strategy has been crucial in the current rise of women’s rights
movements in the Islamic world. Boutheina Cheriet, of the University of
Algiers, remarks that, “At Beijing, for the first time, the right to religious
higher education became a demand. That would then give us credibility in
interpreting the texts.” Although the movements for Muslim women’s rights
elsewhere face uncertain futures, Sisters in Islam appears to have carved an
effective role for themselves in redefining the Islamic community (umma) in
Malaysia.

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74. See generally ONG, supra note 45.
75. Id.
76. Barbara Crossette, Women’s Rights Gaining Attention Within Islam, N.Y. TIMES, May 12, 1996,
at A3.
77. Id.
One of the outcomes of mass employment in Malaysia has been attempts by Islamic revivalists to enforce social controls on women's activities and rights. Some religious leaders assert that Islamic law, the shari'a, governing everyday behavior is immutable and cannot be modified even in contexts of rapid social change. In the name of Islam, many clerics would like to enforce all kinds of stringent rules governing bodily comportment and marriage at the very point when women have become a dominant part of modern public life.

In response to this challenge, the Sisters articulate women's issues within the context of the umma. In their brochures, they express their desire to provide a "[p]ublic forum on the modern nation, state, and Islam: no. 1, with special focus on minorities and women (as a Muslim minority)." They do this by engaging clerics in a dialogue on the question of women in Islamic texts. One of the founding Sisters, Noraini Othman, protests that as industrialization gains momentum, an Arabocentric, narrow, and anachronistic reading of Islamic laws has informed the Islamization policies proposed by the revivalists, thus resulting in a tightening of controls on the participation of Muslims in all spheres of life: "Both the eternal text of the Qur'an and the historical, contingent texts of the sunna and shari'a are read and humanly understood by living people--ulama and other believers--of their own particular time and place."

By insisting on the historicity of interpretations, the Sisters have created a discursive space for a narrative of gender inequality and the possibility for Muslim women to renegotiate gender roles and rights. They claim that, contrary to the clerics' contention, the Qur'an "enjoins justice between women and men." Much of this debate is carried out in the leading newspapers in Malaysia, thus creating a forum in which ordinary citizens can participate through reading and writing to the editors.

Using the print media, the Sisters systematically attack the chauvinist notions that inform the clerics' interpretations of Islam. One of the more glaring holds that because men are "adulterous by nature," Islam sought to accommodate their sexual drive by sanctioning polygamy. The Sisters argue

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78. See generally Aihwa Ong, State versus Islam: Malay Families, Women's Bodies, and the Body Politic in Malaysia, in BEWITCHING WOMEN, PIous MEN: GENDER AND BODY POLITICS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA (Aihwa Ong & Michael G. Peletz eds., 1995) (providing a gendered analysis of the recent Islamic revivalist movement in Malaysia).

79. SISTERS IN ISLAM, Muslim Women Speak (Malaysia forum pamphlet, 1993).


that the *Qur’an* does not give men the blanket right to have more than one wife. They reinterpret polygamy not as a right, but as a responsibility to ensure that socio-justice be achieved for orphans. They point to the socio-historical context—the aftermath of the battle of Uhud, which left many women and children without support—within which the particular verse on polygamy was revealed in the *Qur’an*. Allah indicated polygamy as the solution to this particular problem of war orphans and widows. Indeed, the Sisters reminded, the *Qur’an* placed a number of conditions on this practice, emphasizing justice and fairness to children and wives. They also dismissed the notion that a wife who allows her husband to take a second wife will go to heaven. They conclude firmly, that there is no basis in the *Qur’an* “to say that polygamy is Islam’s solution for men’s alleged [sic] unbridled lust.”

Another bone of contention deals with Arabic dress codes that have been introduced by revivalists as the proper garb of devout Muslims, and also ostensibly to protect women (and men) from the evil temptations of modern society. The Sisters, citing relevant verses, argue that “[c]oercion is contrary to the spirit of the Qur’an which states that there is no compulsion in [Islamic] religion.” They criticize the dress codes as revealing an obsession “to enforce faith through authoritarian means.” The way to protect women, according to Islam, is by decent and respectful treatment of women. The Sisters then expose the social dynamics of male domination in Muslim society: “Men have dominated women politically in many Muslim societies and this control has been falsely equated with legitimate authority. Institutions were established to support and reinforce men’s prejudices, enabling them to evade their responsibility towards Allah and other human beings.”

The Sisters note that by reading the appropriate *Qur’anic* verses, women would be able to make their own choices based on their faith in Allah. The kind of coercive dress policy “in fact, runs counter to Islam’s emancipatory emphasis upon reason [and] freedom as the basis of human morality.”

Thus, the Sisters’ dialogic engagement with the Islamic clerics not only produces a more liberal interpretation of Muslim ideas governing women, it also promotes Muslim women’s agency in dealing directly with their own

83. *Id.*
85. *Id.*
86. *Id.*
87. *Id.*
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Sisters in Islam represents a kind of feminist communitarianism that combines the liberal right to question, revise, and transform the givens that are represented by some cultural or religious hegemony; yet they do so within the cultural norms or projects of their own community. This is the kind of feminism that, without once invoking liberal democratic ideals, has made men in their own society acknowledge women’s exploitation, and at the same time puts a limit on communitarian forces that enforce greater controls over women.

A Malaysian official who is now the chairman of the UN Commission for Human Rights notes:

Malaysia used to be a male-dominated society . . . . In the old days, there was no talk of women’s rights, but through the gradual process of politicization, women . . . are able to assert themselves. Compared with ten years ago, there is much more publicity, consciousness, and more sensitivity on questions of women’s rights.8

Malaysia is still a male-dominated society, but much of the credit for the development of general awareness of gender inequalities must be attributed to the Sisters in Islam, who promoted women’s rights without condemning their own culture or religion. They can productively negotiate with discourses of community, forcing into the open the issue of gender inequality that communitarian narratives suppress. As for cross-cultural strategic sisterhood, the Sisters are linked to feminists in North African and South Asian countries, often meeting to exchange notes and to share strategies of struggle for women’s cultural citizenship within Islamic modernity.

The work of these courageous and astute women deserves respect from Western feminists and their theories, and should not be dismissed or marginalized for accommodating Islam and not subscribing to liberal notions of sexual equality. After all, feminism and women’s rights only make sense in terms of the imagined communities within which people live and, through their embeddedness in cultural relations and norms, decide what is good and worthwhile in their lives.

Globalization produces not a single international sisterhood but many possible, negotiable, and partial collaborations between feminists in different countries. To be truly strategic, Western feminists must recognize and deal creatively with the complex imbrications of global and local regimes of power

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linked to nationalism, capital, and cultural hegemonies. Feminist sisterhoods are strategic when they can create a transnational public—beyond the nation-state—that does not exclude the variety of alternative visions of female citizenship framed within alternative political moralities. Strategic sisterhood, in my view, will be most effective when it adheres to such a "weak"—or flexible—universal of female emancipation.