

Defending Our Dreams: Global Feminist Voices for a New Generation

Shamillah Wilson, Anasuya Sengupta and Kristy Evans (eds.),
Zed Books, 2005, 288 pp.

Elisabeth Porter

This is a powerful book written by young feminists about their dreams. I am 51 years old, with three children the same age as some of the authors; a white Australian feminist academic who has worked primarily in universities in Australia and in Northern Ireland. I have always gained enormous pleasure and satisfaction from teaching young people about the issues covered in the book, and I have had the privilege of teaching students who strive in their various ways to realise similar sorts of dreams. [1] I found the book inspirational, muttering to myself, ‘Yes, this is terrific, yes, yes!’ and I wanted to join in the conversation. Age, it seems, does not always matter when we seek to further social justice and gender equality.

The book pays tribute to the work of AWID, The Association for Women’s Rights in Development, which is an international organisation with headquarters in Toronto, Canada, and members in over 100 countries, primarily in the Global South. AWID shares information and creates critical spaces to strategise about how to improve the lives of girls and women. The book emerges from participants in AWID’s Young Women and Leadership Program.

The 18 contributors come from Australia, Barbados, Canada, India, Nepal, South Africa, Tanzania, UK, Uruguay, USA and Venezuela. Their individual biographies give an insight into their experience – these women have achieved a lot in the fight for gender equality – and communicate the passion and visionary thrust of the book. Anasuya Sengupta, one of the editors, tells us she is ‘old-fashioned enough to believe in the power of the collective and new-fangled enough to believe in future possibilities for generating that energy’ (p. 242). Sushma Joshi ‘believes in versatile activism that mixes politics with vision, and creativity with compassion’ (p. 244). Indigo Williams Willing ‘believes that even the smallest steps can lead to greatest of changes – this is how she makes sense of her life’ (p. 246). When considering global politics today with its ‘war against terrorism,’ militarist madness in Iraq and the Middle East, appalling poverty, HIV/AIDS crisis, the plight of refugees and displaced persons and globalised inequalities, it is easy to become jaded and

PORTER | Defending Feminist Dreams

cynical. This book is a wonderful antidote.

I will explore three questions. What did I really appreciate in this book? What is different about reading a book about global feminism written by young women (rather than older feminists?) What are the remaining challenges for gender equality and what opportunities for inter-generational feminist dialogue?

Four qualities

There are four qualities I really appreciated about this book. An appropriate blend of personal anecdote and political engagement, a fabulous sense of energy conveyed in the writing style, a willingness to raise the really pertinent questions, and a careful balance between expressing dreams and nightmares. The only way to convey these qualities is to draw on the contributors' comments.

First, the personal stories that run through the book connect life stories, political experience, and the motivations underpinning activist engagement. The reader begins to feel s/he knows these women; many are frank about their personal backgrounds and their identities come alive to the reader. Identity is an important issue to all of these women. Paromita Vohra asks with discernment:

When does anxiety about not speaking for others translate into not speaking of them? How do we find a way for the many identities within us to form a fluid whole; that there is a little of me in you and you in me, loved, hated, othered, that we imbue in each other? (p. 207).

I value being reminded of her appeal to trust the intuitive – not as a random personal imagination, a mere flicker across the mind, but as a kernel which ‘begins to form a map of larger political meaning’ once it joins the experiences of others (p. 207). Too often, we shy away from backing our judgement on what can be done to further goals of justice, equality and human rights because it seems too hard, too costly, and too deviant. We can learn much from Salma Maoulidi who writes poignantly how her activism stems from personal experience of exclusion as a black, African, Muslim woman.

Second, there is a wonderful sense of energy and optimism in the writing. Holistic visions, passions, fresh analyses and new, innovative strategies for change are all written about in ways that make them appear possible. Honesty and integrity

Democratiya 5 | Summer 2006

are valued and there is the assumption that change can happen. The message is conveyed that change is dependent on will, politicking, lobbying, strategising and working together.

Third, intelligent and important questions are raised with stark clarity. Most of them are timeless questions that all generations ask, but many have new foci that my generation did not have to face. The contributors ask questions about how to strategise, how to retain integrity and accountability while advocating for social change as feminists, as women, and as women concerned with social justice and gender equality. They ask how global nightmares can be resolved and whether dreams need defending. All the questions are posed in such a way as to challenge me afresh.

Fourth, there is a sensitive balance preserved between the nightmares that frighten young women and the marvellous scope of their imaginative dreaming. Shamillah Wilson and Anasuya Sengupta write of being '20-something, big on dreams, touched by nightmares, living our lives in honest confusion and mundane struggle' (p. 1). Negotiating international identities on the world stage, they write how the big issues of globalisation, war, conflict, poverty, violence and HIV/AIDS mean that 'it is hardly surprising that nightmares jostle with dreams' (p. 2). Our dreamings are, as Sengupta puts it, 'a form of planning' that occurs when one trusts the potential of intuitive, imaginative, idealistic dreams (p. 122).

The voice of a new generation

The perspective of a new generation of women makes for a different reading of global feminism. The book – itself a virtual collaboration – explores the novel role of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in many people's lives as well as the continuing exclusion of many others from the benefits of technology. As Aziza Ahmed puts it, gazing at sexual imagery is not new, but chat rooms, instant messaging and the internet means that 'the interaction that young people are able to have is particular to our generation' (p. 26). The notes referred to at the end of each chapter include more references to internet sites than to academic books or journal articles. Indeed, even classic feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Gloria Steinem are referenced by way of internet links rather than their books.

Second, this is a generation of women who have grown up in the context of a neoliberal globalised agenda and they are unafraid to spell out its evils. Alison

PORTER | Defending Feminist Dreams

Symington notes that her generation cannot imagine life without cash; I could not have said the same. We survived, even thrived, on so little. She supports the need for ‘approaches grounded in ideas of substantive equality’ (p. 45) and I would have welcomed some expansion of what equality, justice and accountability mean, not only in her chapter, but all through the book.

Third, and relatedly, this is also a generation which knows the fear of fundamentalism, particularly right-wing religious fundamentalism that allies itself with neoliberal globalisation. Yet curiously, there is only minimal discussion on women and Islamic fundamentalism in a book on women’s global experience today. Suzan Pritchett talks about the dangers of dualism in the new global order through telling the story of how she and her close friend drew apart, her friend pursuing George Bush’s brand of American religious fundamentalism and she, a liberal, pursuing knowledge of how faith impacts on diversity and overcoming a fragmented world order. She ends beautifully by reminding herself that to be consistent to her beliefs; it is time for her to telephone her friend.

Challenges for Global Feminism

What are the remaining challenges for global feminisms and what is the potential for intergenerational dialogue between feminists? Some issues that remain of concern to women’s organisations and to feminists – identity, patriarchy, class and power inequities – are tackled anew by each new generation. And new issues come onto the agenda – technology, faith and families, and complex intersections between class, race, sexuality and gender, and the role of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Not all the contributors call themselves feminist. This is a long ongoing debate that will continue. Scampini acknowledges the ‘many ways of being “feminist”’ (p. 133). What is new are the multiple layers of advocacy that now exist, aided by technology, active NGOs and coalitions. A good example of this is the effort that led to the formulation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on ‘Women, Peace and Security.’

There are many topics referred to in the book like justice, equality, accountability and democracy that do need more substantial elaboration. There is still a crucial role for feminist scholarship. Further, the book would have benefited from more practical examples of how to translate different understandings of these crucial concepts into practical results. The relationship between theory and practice is not strongly developed in the book. Activism is goal-oriented and its successes

Democratiya 5 | Summer 2006

are measured by results. Change is referred to often, but is usually presented as visionary.

However, the optimism throughout the book is welcome. Rather than getting stuck in arguments over contested meanings, as second-generation postmodern, liberal, socialist and maternal feminists often have, these women know what is important to them and seek in their own lives to struggle closer to their dreams, often reaching unashamedly to what seems intuitively right. Perhaps the peace movement, revived post-9/11, is again backing intuitions and activism in multi-dimensional, inclusive ways.

Wilson and Sengupta point out that this anthology is unique in having representatives from eleven countries, with all populated continents and including a male feminist (p. 3). [2] The future of the women's movement does depend to a large degree on the links between older feminists and young women's organisations. The question as to whether it matters if these are 'feminist' or 'women's organisations pursuing social justice' is a question that will be asked into the next generation. [3] Third-wave, next-generation women can/should work alongside second-wave feminists. Not all new-generation feminists are inspirational or young and not all older feminists are jaded or reluctant to engage with young women. We can be hopeful. As Wilson and Sengupta write, 'Young women today do face different realities from those faced by previous generations, while at the same time benefiting from the gains of earlier feminist struggles' (p. 6). And Maria Alejandra Scampini talks of 'a dialogue of respect and ongoing explanation of our difference' (p. 131). This is healthy. Feminism must be inclusive to be true to itself. Like lovers, wine and antiques, sometimes age matters and sometimes it does not matter so much.

Elisabeth Porter is the Research Director of INCORE (International Conflict Research) at the University of Ulster (www.incore.ulster.ac.uk). From August 2006, she will be the Head of School of International Studies at the University of South Australia. (Elisabeth.Porter@unisa.edu.au). Her recent research is on *Peacebuilding: Women in International Perspective* (Routledge: London and New York), forthcoming. e.porter@ulster.ac.uk

References

Begg, Zanny 1999, 'Thoughts of a twenty-something feminist,' *Green Left*, www.greenleft.org.au/back/1999/356/356p23.htm accessed 09/05/06.

PORTER | Defending Feminist Dreams

Bulbeck, Chilla 2001, 'Feminism by Any Other Name? Skirting the generation debate,' *Outskirts: Feminisms Along the Edge*, Vol. 8.

www.chloe.uwa.edu.au/outskirts/archive/volume8/bulbeck accessed 09/05/06.

Else-Mitchell, Rosamund and Naomi Flutter, eds. 1998, *Talking Up: Young Women's Take on Feminism*, North Melbourne: Spinifex Press.

Porter, Elisabeth 2005, 'Women and security: "You cannot dance if you cannot stand"' *openDemocracy* www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-resolution_1325/dance_2937.jsp.

Notes

- [1] In particular, I refer to the students I taught at Southern Cross University, Australia, who taught me so much about activist politics, defying materialism, sustainable ecology, biodiversity, pluralism, and living simply by living well.
- [2] See Else-Mitchell and Flutter eds. (1998) for a collection of essays by 21 young Australian feminists. See the review by Begg (1999) where she talks about how the conservatism of these feminists is deflating and talks of the absent women she knows who are angry and fighting for gender equality. These are the women of this book.
- [3] See Bulbeck (2001) for a very useful bibliography. See also the resources at Books on/for Young Feminists – WMST-L.http://research.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/young_feminists.html accessed 09/05/06.