

## Global or local solidarity? That's the wrong question: relationality, aspiration and the in-between of feminist activism in Southeast Asia

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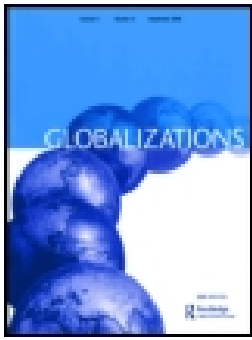
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# Global or local solidarity? That's the wrong question: relationality, aspiration and the in-between of feminist activism in Southeast Asia

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## ABSTRACT

Global solidarity has increasingly been criticized, particularly in postcolonial-feminist theory. Mohanty exposed 'global' sisterhood as a shallow cosmopolitan category based on white/Western feminist experiences that is in danger of erasing difference. Building on her critique, scholars have criticized feminist solidarity across difference itself, preferring 'local' activism. Taking seriously the critique of cosmopolitanism advanced by post-colonial feminists, this article investigates how solidarity projects could reach across difference without undermining it. I argue that sharp dichotomies (global/local; general/particular) are unhelpful, because solidarity is a process that sits uneasily between them. Drawing on interviews with the World March of Women in Indonesia and the Philippines, I show that solidarity across difference is possible because their analysis and practice is both: place-based and situated, as well as aspiring to the generalization of solidarity. The global in that way ceases to be a descriptive category and becomes a normative horizon for collective aspiration.

## KEYWORDS

Activism; feminism; global; global justice; local; World March of Women

## Introduction

In 2003, the World March of Women, a network which then consisted of 5500 groups from 163 countries and territories (World March of Women, 2003, p. 234), presented a declaration to the World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Allegre. The title of the declaration read: 'Perspective of Women of the World March of Women. Declaration at the 2003 World Social Forum'. The most surprising aspect of this title is an omission. There is no plural to *perspective*, the women of the World March of Women apparently spoke with one, global, voice. In the same year, Chandra Mohanty published an essay in which she looked back at her seminal text 'Under Western Eyes' and reflected upon its public reception. As in 1984 – when the original essay was published – she continued to embrace the central argument that Western feminism has for too long suppressed different feminisms, local movements and particular problems in favour of a 'global' sisterhood. Underscoring her critique of this cosmopolitan, white/Western feminism, she concluded that '(much) white feminism is not merely different but wrong' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 223). It is wrong because it claims to represent all women in a predetermined, generalized category of 'womanhood' that overlooks the different forms of problems and struggles in favour of a homogenized category

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that is analytically in vain and politically in danger of stabilizing imperialist constellations. On the basis of Mohanty's critique of global feminism, some scholars have gone as far as criticizing the idea of feminist solidarity across difference itself. Felski (1997), for instance, interprets this 'emphasis on particularity' as an argument against any large-scale social theory, and hence against generalization in general. Mohanram (1999, p. 91) similarly connects the necessary call for specificity and particularity to a turning-away from systemic global inequalities. Dhawan (2013) highlights the complexities of liberal cosmopolitan articulations of solidarity with the global structures of domination which they claim to resist. Global solidarity projects, she argues, are based on global capital as a 'necessary precondition for the emergence of contemporary cosmopolitan sensibility' (Dhawan, 2013, p. 140). This, in her view, is mirrored in the cosmopolitan theories of solidarity which have no effects but to morally elevate those who articulate them.<sup>1</sup>

Taking seriously the critique of cosmopolitanism advanced by post-colonial feminists, this article investigates what solidarity projects could look like if they were to reach across difference without undermining it. While the dualistic understandings of the global/local divide in their critiques may not correspond to the praxis of internationalist feminist movements, their interventions do reflect a sense of crisis in 'global activism' that is widely shared in feminist activist circles. For instance, the World Social Forums have in recent years been in a process of decentralization (if not decay), the 2006 one already experimenting with a 'polycentric' setup, held in Caracas and Bamako (Conway, 2007, p. 51). Beyond this decentralization, it is fair to say that this 'global' event has generally been decreasing in importance while some regional or national forums have been able to thrive.

What unites the above critiques is a shared skepticism towards 'global solidarity' as a frame for emancipatory feminist struggles. Their criticism is directed both at the practice of cosmopolitan solidarity projects and the theories operating at a 'global level'. The political and the epistemological/analytical are therefore strongly intertwined in this debate. In International Relations (IR), a similar discussion can be observed: while on the one hand, some theorists are trying to create a 'more global IR' (Acharya, 2014), others have criticized the category of the global as a potentially imperialist one (Escobar, 2001; Kamola, 2013; Tickner, 2003, p. 296). Based on fieldwork with feminist solidarity projects, I argue in the following that in order to understand solidarity across difference, sharp oppositions (global/local; general/particular) are fundamentally unhelpful, because solidarity is a process that sits uneasily between these dichotomies. Drawing on interviews with activists of the World March of Women in Indonesia and the Philippines, I show that their solidarity across difference is possible because they understand themselves in relational terms. They overcome an individualist ontology without introducing a cosmopolitan ethics of sameness instead, because their analysis and practice is both: place-based and situated, as well as aspiring to the generalization of solidarity.

The omission in the opening section can therefore be understood from an analysis of the practices that navigate this in-between. I argue that the omission is neither an indicator for a naïve assumption of one-ness within the World March of Women, nor is it a mistake that should be remedied. It signifies a political aspiration rather than a false description. The global is, in this reading, not present as a shared condition. Rather, solidarity builds on relationality, which is strongly place-based. At the same time, however, the global is necessary as a highly normative political horizon. Conceived in such a way, relapsing into sharp distinctions, or 'levels' (Onuf, 1995) is not only a theoretical error but also a constant danger for activists, because inhabiting the in-between is so exhausting. It involves constant practices of negotiation, particularly between generalization and localization.

In the remainder of this article, I first illustrate the critique of 'global feminism' that has been formulated by postcolonial scholars and the calls for a localization of activism in its aftermath. I

then argue that this binary thinking is misguided and can be overcome by an activist practice that is relational – highlighting the interdependence and rootedness in community – while constantly aspiring to transcend the borders of this community through a mutually agreed upon generalization across difference. I then show empirically that the World March of Women has been successful in inhabiting the in-between through a commitment to relationality and aspiration. Their solidarity is not intended to homogenize the struggles but to create a temporally limited common position which continually has to be re-articulated. These complicated processes are necessarily entangled with place and scale while transforming these categories in the very process of engaging in solidarity across difference.

### **‘Global feminism’ and its critique**

In the second half of the twentieth century, a quantitative and qualitative increase in the transnational linkages of women’s movements has been observed (Dufour et al., 2010, p. 1). The injustices that they were rallying against were increasingly ‘understood to be the consequence of economic and political power relations that have become globalized’ (Eschle & Maignushca, 2010, p. 5). From this followed a widening in cognitive and protest practice that had a decidedly utopian character. ‘Another world’ was not only seen as possible, activists proclaimed to ‘hear her breathing’ (Roy, 2004). Particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, feminist activists within the Global Justice Movement were able to form a progressive transnational coalition: during painstaking interactions across differences, conflicts, and inequalities, women’s movements worldwide were negotiated ‘under the contested sign of ‘global feminism’ (Conway, 2012, p. 380). During the last decade, however, practices and theories of solidarity ‘are being remade’ (Conway, 2012). In fact, the ‘globality’ in global feminism has become heavily criticized within the decentralized feminist groups which, increasingly, turn away from the generalization of solidarity towards a localization of their struggles.<sup>2</sup> This can be explained by caveats regarding ‘global solidarity’, both theoretically and practically: On the one hand, ‘the global’ is increasingly understood as a failed category that re-instantiates transnational capitalism rather than undermining it. On the other hand, building on the partly frustrating experiences of the Global Justice Movement’s ineffectiveness and cooptation, activists have turned away from international politics, refocusing on local and national struggles.

The central critique of ‘global feminism’ is famously articulated by Mohanty (2003) by way of distinguishing her concept of feminism without borders from ‘borderless feminism’ or ‘global sisterhood’. She highlights that ‘lines between and through nations, races, classes, sexualities, religions and disabilities are real – and that a feminism without borders must envision change and social justice work across these lines of demarcation and division’ (Mohanty, 2003, p. 2). According to her, notions of complete identification with the other – in a vague category of global sisterhood – are therefore blurring the view for what it actually takes to create feminist solidarity across these lines. She argues that these vague ascriptions lead to the appropriation of the experiences of Non-Western feminists and their struggles by hegemonic white women’s movements (Mohanty, 2003, p. 18), and may reify the very categories they aim to overcome: by contrasting the ‘Third World Woman’ with the liberated Western feminists, the latter alone become the subjects of any counter-history (Mohanty, 2003, p. 39). The ‘strategic’ move of categorizing all women as global sisters, connected through the same oppression, has often only been used to elevate those Westerners who believe that they have liberated themselves more from the common oppression, hence objectivizing Southern sisters as victims. Mohanty (2003, p. 33) shows that this move – irrespective of the intentions – is ineffective as a political strategy. Instead, she proposes that ‘it is only by

understanding the contradictions inherent to women's location within various structures that effective political action and challenges can be devised'.

On the basis of this critique, scholars have criticized global justice activism as a problematic practice (Dhawan, 2013) and suggested to concentrate on the 'local' in order to circumvent these pathologies (Felski, 1997). Yet, in a passage of Mohanty's reflection that receives less attention, she cautions against such a rushed criticism which had been performed utilizing her original essay. Although she reaffirms her core critique of Western, universalist feminism and is generally happy that it found its way into the mainstream of feminist discourses, she is struck by the prominent tendency to interpret her embrace of the particularism, the local, and the different as a normative end in itself, and – as a consequence – to read it as a rejection of the general, the systemic, the global.

I did not argue against all forms of generalization, nor was I privileging the local over the systemic, difference over commonalities [...]. I did not write [...] that there would be no possibility of solidarity between Western and Third World feminists. Yet, this is often how the essay is read and utilized. I have wondered why such a sharp opposition has developed. (Mohanty, 2003, p. 224)

In the following, I will argue that these 'sharp oppositions' arise because the practice of solidarity across difference is so full of prerequisites and, in effect, exhausting. Activists fall back into these categories at times in frustration, and scholars who observe these processes may be tempted to use these moments as analytical shortcuts to make statements about the 'impossibility' of solidarity. Yet, the practice of solidarity across difference is situated in the in-between. What scholars can do is to trace and systematize the prerequisites for solidarity across difference in order to support their practice.

## Relationality and aspiration in feminism across difference

If we accept the critique of global sisterhood, how is solidarity across borders still possible? It is important to note that Mohanty has *not* concluded from her critique of 'global feminism' that solidarity across difference itself is in vain. Unlike Felski and Dhawan, she does not favour inward-looking versions of feminisms focusing on 'their own' state rather than reaching out across borders. She challenges us to overcome the ascriptive and naïve versions of global feminism, instead proposing a definition of solidarity 'in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 7). Current feminist movements are therefore in the delicate position to formulate progressive visions of solidarity while evading the pathologies of a naïve globalism that has arguably been coopted by neo-liberal forms of cosmopolitanism (Gowan, 2001; Johansen, 2015). Based on this overall trajectory, I argue that the World March of Women in Southeast Asia is actualized in the in-between: neither do they assume a generalization of global feminist sisterhood, nor do they merely retreat into difference.<sup>3</sup> The solidarity of the World March of Women lies in the practice of highlighting particularity while constructing commonality. But how does this work? In order to theorize this practice, two concepts shall be introduced, relationality and aspiration.

### Relationality

Relationality has been used in various ways by different intellectual traditions. I do not use the term to promote any specific theoretical school but as a useful abstract conception for how the actors of

the World March of Women see themselves in the world. I thus stress the self-perception of feminist activists as relational subjects. Relationality can be defined as a form of living together in which meaning, motivation and identity do not mainly arise from individual success or position but from a shared sense of belonging to a community which makes life meaningful and is hence also the major political category and subject. This also means that life and politics are entangled with different forms of oppression such as sexism, classism and racism. The relationality that I refer to here is therefore directed at collective subjects as the agents of history, but also aware of the different potential dividing lines and power relations that run across groups and struggles unevenly and materialize as *difference*.

In the following, I am concerned with the consequences of this particular way of relating in and to the world. This leaves untouched the ontological question of whether the social *in general* should be understood as relational and what this would mean. Nevertheless, when analyzing the ways in which the actors who – I argue – perceive themselves relationally, I can utilize the instruments of those academic theories which have described the social world as relational, that is introduce the distinction between an individualist ontology and a relational one. Mohanty (2003, p. 90) assumes a relational nature of identity and highlights the necessary negations that come with the assumption of a singular, fixed, and essential self. Relationality can be understood in opposition to networked individualism, a concept that assumes that ‘people function more as connected individuals and less as embedded group members’ (Donati & Archer, 2015, p. 11). The core feature of relationality, in contrast, is that society is not a space containing relations, but rather that society *is* relation (Donati, 2007). Yet, this does not imply that parts of a relation collapse into one. Rather, ‘robust singular selves – not individuals – are necessary preconditions for subjects to form relations’ (Donati & Archer, 2015, p. 13). Relational logic implies that everything is already connected to everything else (Kothari et al., 2019, xxiv). This encompasses the history and emotions of subjects who are therefore committed to a specific care ethics with a relational model of moral agency (Keller, 1997): ‘Inasmuch as ethics and relationality are understood to be directly implicated in each other [...], any threat to our relationality must necessarily present as a threat to our capacity for ethical existence’ (Drichel, 2019, p. 2). This is why relational subjects are more strongly implicated into each other’s lives than it could be imagined on the basis of the social theories that stress autonomous individuals.

The relational activism of the World March of Women in Southeast Asia is based on understanding gender, class and race as interconnected. One concept cannot be approached without the other, because they have entangled histories, that is they have been shaping the identities of women in formerly colonized countries in specific ways that do overlap with the histories of women in other places but are not the same. These histories shape hierarchies between classes, races and genders until today (Randeria, 2006). Therefore, the struggles against patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism are inextricably linked in their understanding. From this perspective, it is thus not helpful to imagine an individual or a group that stands outside these relations when mobilizing. Therefore, it would also be a mistake to define feminism only with relation to gender because being a woman is also constituted by race, class, nation, and sexuality (Mohanty, 2003, p. 55). Relationality is therefore first and foremost an attentiveness to relations of power, which oftentimes figure as ‘difference’. Yet, from a relational standpoint, these relations of power ‘are not reducible to binary oppositions or oppressor/oppressed relations’ (Mohanty, 2003) but rather take intricate forms, with complicated consequences like cooptation and mimicry which have been well-documented in post-colonial theory (Bhabha, 1994).

Therefore, it is not enough to attribute difference to ‘culture’ or ‘place’, because also culture is not a static or clearly place-based category. Fierke and Jabri (2019, p. 7) make a strong argument against the idea of *dialogue* across difference. It does, from their perspective, not make sense to define the sides of a divide – especially not in geographical terms – because ‘culture cannot be possessed or owned, but is an ongoing and changing performance in relation to others’. In contrast, mobility and migration have the consequence that subjects are the products of multiple historical or present cultures (Fierke & Jabri, 2019, p. 6). In effect, to attribute cultural specificities to places seems dubious to them:

One might speak of cultural practices, which have their historical origins in particular places, but this too is somewhat murky. If Buddhism, for instance, is taken as a practice, its origins would go back to the Buddha in India, but that which is referred to as Buddhist practice, can be quite different in the context of Tibet, Thailand or China.

On the basis of this, they opt for Karen Barad’s (2007) concept of ‘intra-action’. Instead of assuming the task to be to create solidarity across difference (and hence to mark difference), this approach ‘begins with the ‘cuts’ by which difference is defined within wholes’ (Fierke & Jabri, 2019, p. 9). *Interaction* describes the engagement between separate cultures, each assumed to have an intrinsic identity, that is ‘separateness is the point of departure’ (Fierke & Jabri, 2019). Barad’s concept of ‘intra-action’, in contrast, takes a different avenue by starting off from ‘the whole’ and examining how difference is produced within.

This approach explicitly resonates with relationality, because the authors emphasize that the meaning of the self cannot be detached from the whole (Fierke & Jabri, 2019, p. 10). Yet, it also is in danger of potentially introducing another cosmopolitanism through the backdoor, because it presupposes a whole without clarifying whose privilege it would be to define this whole inside of which everyone needs to relate to others (Bartelson, 2010; Kamola, 2019). A postcolonial perspective on relationality would therefore foreground a feminist praxis committed to combating inequalities among women while being sensitive to difference (Conway, 2008, p. 209) – even if this means that ‘separateness is the point of departure’ (Fierke & Jabri, 2019, p. 9). That requires to engage in a fragile double-movement by recognizing (the possibility of) a common struggle without erasing differences or ignoring inequalities.

The relationality of the World March of Women navigates along such lines. It posits the centrality of particularism and locality, because the feminists engaged in transnational organizing processes have learned over time that place is important not only organizationally, but that the erasure of difference in the project of asserting a unitary social movement subject also erases their histories and identities and therefore debars instead of spurring relationality. They have therefore been ‘avoiding claims to the universal that accompany the term ‘global’ and the historical project of global sisterhood’ (Conway, 2008, p. 210).

### **Aspiration**

Yet, Fierke and Jabri are right that there is a tension between difference and relationality. Parts can relate to each other only when they have not yet merged into one, but they also cannot relate by retreating into pure difference. Solidarity, accordingly, cannot be established by conserving the particular only, but the particular must seek commonalities with other parts by relating to a whole. Alejandro (2019, p. 177) has systematized such a dynamic relationship between the whole and its parts as



a double process of complementary and contradictory forces of particularisation and unification that takes place both among the objects perceived and in the realm of perception. The process of unification maintains a common frame of reference despite the dissemblance of the parts (instead of their separation). The process of particularisation maintains difference, despite the processes of homogenisation that result from the pooling of differences.

For plural subjects to engage in a relationship of solidarity, they hence need not have a shared relation to the whole but each need to work on the way they relate to the whole so that it will be mutually compatible for the construction of common goals. The main problem with cosmopolitan visions of ‘one world’ or with ‘global sisterhood’ (but potentially also with Barad’s intra-action) is therefore not the reference to the whole itself but the ahistorical way it is understood: their methodological premise confuses the global as a descriptive instead of a political category (see also Ypi, 2011, p. 52; Anderl & Witt, *in press*). Conway shows that the categories of local and global cannot be thought independently of each other, because they are relational constructs: ‘what we call the “local” or the “global” are not the product of single but rather multiple scalar processes and must, therefore, be understood as mutually constituted’ (Conway, 2008, p. 212; see also Randeria, 2003; Masson, 2010). As she argues, terms like transnational and global are not merely analytical but carry ideological weight. This is an important insight. Yet, for solidarity across difference to emerge, it is necessary to not only deconstruct these categories but to politicize them. The equality signified in the cosmopolitan metaphor ‘we are all in the same boat’ is empirically wrong (Dhawan, 2013). Yet, the global is still necessary for solidarity across difference to have an avenue for stating a common political vision that transcends incremental, local reforms.

This can be theorized with what Jodi Dean (2019, p. 2) calls ‘a common political horizon’. She develops the figure of the comrade who is not based on identitarian commonality but on a political relation that calls for ‘a set of expectations for action toward a common goal [...] – no matter the differences’. The solidarity resulting from this ‘collectivizes and directs action in light of a shared vision for the future (Dean, 2019)’. Dean develops the comrade as a generic figure for political relations, the horizon of which is communism. Such a horizon is per definition not preoccupied with given administrative units. It is ‘the horizon of political struggle not for the nation but for the world’ (Dean, 2019, p. 5). At its core, the comrade as a generic political figure embodies the promise of equality for which activists need to confront their prior attachments to given hierarchies, and which takes them ‘away from the suppositions of unique particularity [...] towards the sameness of those fighting on the same side’ (Dean, 2019, p. 15). In developing the comrade as a generic political subject, sameness is thus produced across differently positioned actors by adopting a common political horizon. Understood as such a common political horizon, the global is necessary for feminism across difference, but its purpose is to create a political desire rather than to figure as a given geographical category. It is hence precisely its ideological overload that can be utilized for organizing and practicing solidarity. The global – in such an application – loses its descriptive nature and becomes an aspirational commitment. Yet, in contrast to Dean, I do not want to suggest that the common political horizon is already a given for feminist movements. Rather, I want to stress how these movements work towards such a common political horizon in a process that transcends the own political vision by considering the politics and identities of others, and by commonly working across such difference.

It is during this very work to construct a common global horizon that solidarity across difference takes place. In that, reaching for global solidarity is a process that is only possible with a sense of belonging to a context and awareness of difference. This context is not fixed but continually constituted and altered in exchange with movements from other contexts with whom one does not

proclaim sameness but aspires to unite on collectively negotiated terms. The practice of solidarity across difference is, in other words, a process of collectively constructing a common political horizon. This common global horizon may be an unachievable goal, but it is at the core of the feminist praxis because through this aspiration to formulate a global horizon with others will the self be permanently reflected upon and constituted anew in a widening struggle for liberation. In contrast to what Mohanty calls Western, universalist feminism, this common global horizon enables a form of solidarity work lacking a neatly defined political end-state because liberation from patriarchy will likely look different in different places. The common horizon of feminism is defined by what it is opposed to – and the unity that can be constructed during these common struggles. This fits well with the definition of feminism by Finlayson (2016, ch.2) as (i) the recognition of the fact of patriarchy and (ii) opposition to this state of affairs. For feminist solidarity across difference, a sense of ‘the global’ is necessary in order to articulate the interconnected systems, structures and mechanisms of patriarchal oppression, in all their diverse manifestations. While there are universals in almost any political agenda, the major difference is therefore between those political imaginaries that assume universals which simply have to be discovered by those who do not yet subscribe to them, and those who strive for new universals to be constructed in reflexive collaboration with others.<sup>4</sup>

This double-bind, to appreciate and deepen the particularity of place-based feminist movements and their causes, and to reach for global solidarity, may seem like a contradiction. Yet, for solidarity across difference to be successful in a world deeply shaped by intersectional histories of oppression and their lasting hierarchical constellations, this in-between is the space of possibilities. In this in-between, relationality can work because it recognizes and interacts with the other, and it is where aspiration has a place because identity is not fixated to a pre-specified territory. Solidarity can then be expressed by a conscious attempt of articulating a space that is marked out by a twofold principle: It overcomes essentialisms such as the local community/the state through active work of seeking common interest across difference (generalization of solidarity). But it also overcomes cosmopolitan ethics by politicizing difference and particularism. Moving into these in-between zones is exhausting because the self cannot hold on to pre-given rituals, traditions and principles of thought but needs to be open to transcend these categories by listening to their counterparts and trying to establish commonality. While this entails major difficulties and tensions, I show in the following on the basis of feminist activists in Southeast Asia how they have been able to practice solidarity across difference by highlighting and protecting particularity while aspiring to unity.

### **Solidaritas Perempuan! Indonesian feminism**

Solidaritas Perempuan (*Women’s Solidarity*, SP) is a feminist movement organization established in 1990 based in Jakarta, Indonesia, which has been consistently fighting for gender justice and defending the rights of grassroots women on the issues of conflict over natural resources and climate change, food sovereignty, migration and trafficking, and religious pluralism. SP is an individual-based membership organization, with 780 registered members, organized in eleven communities and claims to represent almost 6,000 regular supporters who constitute them as a movement.<sup>5</sup> During the last 25 years, SP has been one of the most influential groups within the broader Indonesian feminist movement. SP has been working for pluralism and human rights from the beginning, drawing strongly on international support, as part of the World March of Women and other transnational coalitions. However, they also related to local traditions, notably in combining feminism and Islam (Rinaldo, 2013, p. 155). Besides the promotion of women leaders

though workshops and seminars, SP is also a fierce critic of exploitative corporate practices and promotes a feminist view on environmental problems. Furthermore, SP has made it a central concern to protect female migrant workers, especially in the domestic realm. Since neoliberal globalization has increased patriarchy and thus the exploitation of women in their analysis, SP is opposed to free trade and criticizes international institutions such as the World Bank. They regularly attend the WSF in an attempt to actively connect local and national struggles of female workers with the transnational movement against corporate globalization.

In order to understand the development of SP, its history in the 1990s is important. During the UN Decade for Women and the Beijing Conference, Indonesia was still ruled by the authoritarian Suharto. This meant that 'women's issues' could only be represented abroad by Dharma Wanita, a curious women's organization which consists (until today) of civil servants' wives. Nevertheless, some of SP's activists travelled secretly to Beijing in 1995 and imported the slogan 'all issues are women issues' (Interview SP). When Suharto was forced to step down in 1998, there was a considerable euphoria in SP about finally being able to join into the transnational movement. They immediately reoriented their advocacy efforts towards international politics and integrated strongly with the Global Justice Movement. They hence got involved with lobbying international institutions such as the World Bank Group, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). However, they successively recognized the lacking effects of this international involvement, and there was a growing internal dissatisfaction with this style of advocacy, one interview partner of mine describing it polemically: 'NGOs get carried away, their meetings are in this hotel, that hotel. There's no resistance if we always want to be in a hotel'. At the same time, many in the movement were noticing that the democratization in the domestic realm was not as far-reaching as one could have hoped for. Therefore, SP activists grew increasingly impatient of the approach to concentrate on international organizations as part of a 'global' movement. A growing part of the movement felt that the work should be concentrated on issues closer to home.

This controversy shortly after 2000 had a strong impact on the movement. The organization changed course, but decisively did not simply localize their activism. Although it has been a difficult process, particularly among the rural membership, SP has made considerable steps to emancipate from the either/or logic of localization or global justice activism, which particularly led to a specification of the overall agenda. This agenda remains grounded in the values of transnational solidarity while putting more emphasis on domestic problems and formulating positions on the basis of the latter. The personal relation to women affected by violence and exclusion are therefore front and centre in their work (Interview SP). Only on the basis of these concrete solidarity relations, generalization is sought where appropriate. As a result, SP did not scale back but diversify its internationally-oriented repertoire. While remaining involved in transnational networks, the activists have since been focusing on UN Women and UNDP as partners on specific issues (such as violence against women), while largely withdrawing from the international financial institutions, particularly from 'inside' lobbying.

In the year 2018 when the World Bank Group held its Annual Meeting in Bali, though, SP was highly active in organizing the 'Gerak Lawan' counter summit with its slogan 'World Beyond Banks'.<sup>6</sup> In this context, SP was able to mobilize a specifically Indonesian experience within the transnational solidarity campaign and hence to contribute beyond the cosmopolitan idea of everyone contributing equally to a transnational discourse. Bräuchler (2018) has shown how Bali as a place is particularly well-suited for such a relational approach. The negative effects of international tourism with water shortages and rampant capitalization of 'traditional culture' have spurred increasing mobilization by local activists who highlight the entanglements of international

institutions with local identity and national power politics, contesting the politics of place vis a vis the local and national government while making use of the repertoires of 'Occupy' and hence identifying with a wave of 'global protest' (Gerbaudo, 2017). Tapping into this experience, SP and their coalition-partners were able to connect these diverse arenas and use them in a programmatic fashion. The slogan 'World Beyond Banks' shows the aspirational content which is mobilized as the motivational glue for local feminist movements to get involved on the basis of their everyday experiences.

As another major shift, SP has strengthened its focus on migrant domestic workers, an issue neatly suitable for an in-between approach highlighted here. The young women who emigrate from Indonesia, particularly to rich countries in the Middle East, are often without legal or practical support in their new environments and lack the resources to defend themselves in circumstances often shaped by violence and exploitation. SP invested heavily into this field of activism, supporting the affected women and lobbying on their behalf, by that integrating the solidarity-relations with these young and often not formally educated women in a transnationally marketized society, and pointing out the entanglements that make it necessary for feminism to act beyond borders – while still drawing on particular experiences rather than abstracting to a vague 'global womanhood'.

Despite these successes in mobilizing in aspirational ways that motivate to generalize solidarity beyond the own community, this approach proves to be highly complex and not always practical. For instance, the narratives on domestic labour migration sometimes tip over into nationalist or xenophobic attitudes. Some of my interview partners have reported that while the abuse of Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Arab countries have been sharply attacked, the frequent abuses of domestic workers inside Indonesian households have received less attention. While this was not necessarily a conscious decision, it shows the precariousness of offering solidarity to a particular group, especially when this is legitimized on the basis of their nationality.

Similarly, the complexity of acting in-between the personal relationships with rural women and their 'local' problems and the attempt mobilize towards a deeper critique of transnational capitalism has led to awkward situations. For instance, in the course of the campaign against foreign debt, SP mobilized many rural women and took them to Jakarta in busses to demonstrate against illegitimate debt. After the demonstration, some of these rural women approached the organizers, asking when they could get their money back. These women thought that they had demonstrated against their personal debt rather than an issue as abstract as Indonesian debt to international creditors. With many rural families being highly indebted to local landlords in Indonesia, this line of reasoning seems appropriate but was not anticipated by their advocates in Jakarta. Again, the activists were challenged to become more grounded and to relate their understanding of political economy to the rural structures in which they are rendered meaningful for women workers before abstracting problems such as debt to a general campaign.

It is remarkable that SP – upon reflection – approached this apparent problem of 'too global' a framing, not through a simple turning away from transnational issues. In contrast, they have been investing into the internal communication and education, creating spaces where their members can relate their local problems to more general trajectory. All members of SP receive two trainings that they call ideologization [ideologisasi]: 'Feminist training' and 'globalization analysis'. The latter is taught from a critical political economy perspective in order to make grassroots groups aware of global mechanisms of exploitation. The World Bank, the WTO and other financial institutions such as ADB figure prominently in these analyses. Targeting particularly rural communities and women's groups with these trainings and actively connecting their rural life-worlds with these

transnational issues, SP epitomizes the idea of a movement that acts in the in-between: their members become aware of the power to frame their daily problems in a globalized analysis, hence emancipating themselves from the idea of individual responsibility in a local exploitative relationship (for instance the landlord). This allows them to knit chains of solidarity with feminists in other places, without assuming that their suffering needs to be the same for mutuality to arise.

### Navigating practices of solidarity: the World March of Women in the Philippines

While the World March of Women has its origins in Québec, the movement quickly transnationalised during the 1990s and had a first peak on 8 March 2000 (International Women's Day), when hundreds of national and local women's marches were organized across the world. One of the biggest of them took place in the Philippines where 'Kilos Kabaro' [movement of sisters] was the network driving it. Kilos Kabaro renamed itself 'World March of Women – Pilipinas' (WMW-Pilipinas) after that march in 2000, showcasing a tighter integration into the transnational network than their Indonesian sisters from SP which remained more loosely connected (see above). The agenda of the World March of Women in the Philippines is mainly focused on opposing violence against women, militarism and imperialism, trafficking of women, and women's health. The coalition of 11 groups, some of them coalitions of their own, is decidedly anti-capitalist and consciously connects gender issues with questions of material and ecological justice.

The stronger integration into a transnational network after 2000 did not remain uncontested, because nationalism is deeply ingrained into the Philippina Left. Roces (2009) has shown how women's organizations constructed 'the Filipino woman' as part of the feminist project of addressing prostitution as a women's issue in the Philippines. This framework has been particularly directed against US imperialism, which still has stronger moral urgency in the Philippines when compared to other contexts due to the presence of US military bases on its coast. Around these bases, high numbers of sex work, rape and HIV/Aids have been counted, the WMW-Pilipinas being heavily involved in the activism against these issues, and in the daily support for its victims.<sup>7</sup> It is in this context that we have to understand the framing of the 'the Filipino woman' as a counter-discourse. This, however, has resulted in an almost synonymous usage of the terms 'nationalist' and 'radical'. The anti-imperialism which resulted from the solidarity work with victims of US military expansion has hence inspired the feminist left to partly turn nationalist in response (interview WMW). This is also the case for some member groups of the WMW-Pilipinas. Surprisingly, however, the coalition has been able to accommodate these groups and to deepen their mutual relationship with them despite this core issue being heavily contested. When I asked about this tendency, and whether I got it wrong, one leading activist responded:

No, that's so true, they're very nationalist. We sometimes have to discuss that, because I am uncomfortable with nationalism as such [...]. I relate with the labour movement, so we know very much that it's important not to have our national distinction. If we talk about sovereignties against US colonisation and things like that, I'm like oh Gosh what is this national chauvinism about [...]. Now, I'm always in discussion about that with [others in the movement].

The Philippina Left has been sharply divided since the fall of Marcos' dictatorship. This divide is also mirrored in the women's movement. There are the Reaffirmists (RAs) on the one hand – those who reaffirm the revolutionary, Maoist and strictly anti-cooperative course of the 1980s – and the Rejectionists (RJs), who reject this sectarian and violent course and adapted their activism to the newly established democracy. The feminist strand of the former is prominently represented

by the Gabriela Party. In such a situation, it is in fact surprising that the feminist groups engaged with victims of trafficking and sex workers around the US bases have joined the WMW-Pilipinas – led by a majority of anti-nationalists – as their coalition, rather than linking up with Gabriela which offers an anti-imperialist/nationalist analysis. How did WMW-Pilipinas achieve this?

The movement has successfully bridged domestic divides through its engagement in international alliance-work (Daphi et al., 2019, p. 8). This can be explained by their constant mobilization of the in-between: providing a framework that makes it possible for groups with nationalist attitudes to focus on commonalities with movements abroad by creating a common platform that is grounded in, and relates to, domestic grievances, but moves beyond the national frame of reference and broadens the horizons of the involved activists. One important method of bringing women's groups together has been to gather on the Women's Marches on March 8. On the first demonstration that was cautiously joined by the nationalists, a common theme was developed which focused on anti-war commitments which nationalists and anti-nationalists shared (Daphi et al., 2019, p. 11).

During my fieldwork with WMW-Pilipinas, I was struck by the energy the activists invested into transcending the above-described divisions of the Philippine left in their practices of solidarity. When, for instance, a number of farmers were shot by the police because they had been blocking a road and demanding that the government support them with water, many of the feminist elite shrugged off the concerns of the farmers because these belonged to the RAs and were hence seen as violent Maoists. WMW-Pilipinas, on the other hand, made it a point to support those farmers publicly despite them being on the other side of the RA/RJ divide. One activist told me how paralyzing the sectarian character of the left was and how it inhibited the women's movement to come together. However, she added that the opportunism on the side of the democratic forces was just as bad. Hence, she and the other activists from the WMW-Pilipinas took it on them to formulate a position of solidarity that aspired to transcend both these divides, supporting the farmers despite them being sectarian Maoists, and provoking powerful allies in parliament, NGOs and academia.

In such a vein, the WMW-Pilipinas has been able to build relations with groups from other camps by consciously adopting a relational approach that doesn't start with a 'global' strategy but with mutuality and slow processes of getting to know each other while formulating common aspiration and carrying that into the international networks (Interview WMW). It has generally been a strength of the World March of Women which from early on knew how to link issues such as poverty and violence against women (Moghadam, 2009, p. 74). This has also been achieved thanks to the cooperation with and inspiration from indigenous women's groups. As I learnt in interviews, indigenous groups are the only political movements on the Philippine left that are able to evade the allegiance to either RA or RJ: 'the indigenous communities, unlike other sectors which have been organised and aligned automatically to political blocks, the indigenous communities have enjoyed, a certain independence [...] and I find that healthier in terms of being able to cross different networks' (Interview WMW). The movement was able to actively draw on indigenous self-articulations in order to construct an independent women's agenda which could potentially be integrating the feminist left at large. The involvement of indigenous women's movements does, however, come at an organizational cost. Usually, the WMM-Pilipinas has a procedure for groups to become members in their movement in order to ensure durability of cooperation and trust-building. In the case of the organization that brings indigenous voices to the March, the organizational ties are looser. Speaking to one of their leaders in Manila, she told me that her organization's relations usually emerge with individual member groups of the WMW-Pilipinas, and often are established through personal relationships, and 'we would be working either separately or together on issues'. She explained that 'there would be moments where

World March of Women would *as* World March of Women invite [us]. But for particular activities'. That is to say, the organization does not want to become an official member of the WMW-Pilipinas, a situation that requires more flexible arrangements for both sides than is usually the case. This stance is endorsed by the WMW-Pilipinas. It opens spaces of in-between that are awkward at times, but they circumvent the violence of representation for the indigenous women. Their aspiration for ending patriarchy and the exploitation of resources is expressed together without claiming the complete identification with the other. The indigenous women feel the trust they receive by not having to commit to a full-package agenda, and the activists of the World March are assured to receive the solidarity of indigenous activists on particular issues, a meaningful commitment by them in the minefield that is the Philippine left.

## Conclusion

This article portrayed two feminist movements affiliated with the World March of Women, the *World March of Women – Pilipinas*, and the Indonesian *Solidaritas Perempuan*. In search of the possibility of emancipatory solidarities, I argued that their praxis can be informative for the theory and practice of solidarity across difference more generally. On the backdrop of the recent critique of 'global justice' as a cosmopolitan framework for activism which has arguably re-inscribed colonial continuities by morally elevating white, Western feminisms, a turning-away from solidarity across difference has been discussed during the last years. This expresses itself in a new focus on place and particularity as the analytical and normative backbone of a postcolonial theorization of feminist solidarity. Yet, I have argued that the practice of the World March of Women is more complex than that, because it overcomes essentialisms (categorical difference) through the active work of seeking commonalities across difference. But at the same time, it also overcomes liberal cosmopolitan ethics by politicizing particularism. In this oscillation between the generalization of their cause and the protection of particularity, solidarity across difference is observable. On the one hand, this finding hints at possibilities for solidarities across difference. On the other hand, it also explains why such solidarity relations are often unstable and short-lived: their maintenance requires complex and multi-scalar practices of mutual understanding with respect to particular circumstances and needs, while at the same time coming up with temporally limited generalizations for cooperative activism.

I have argued that, therefore, solidarity across difference is successfully expressed in in-between spaces, which makes the activism in such a fashion exhausting. In analyzing this approach, I have shown that two principles are central to its success: relationality and aspiration. The subjects in a solidarity-relationship are strongly implicated into each other's lives and their histories. This involves the entangled struggles of gender, class and race, all of which keep shaping the hierarchical production of divided societies. In order to deeply relate across the resultant differences and hierarchies, I have shown that long and complex processes fostering mutual understanding and trust-building are necessarily coupled with reflecting on the own practice from the perspective of the other. In many instances, these groups were able to express their solidarity through a conscious attempt of articulating a programme which caters to both, necessities of a particular place and a common aspiration, in effect transforming each of them.

These in-between spaces remain precarious and are haunted both by nationalist impulses that stem from anti-imperialist traditions, and globalist hopes that are fuelled both by neoliberal discourses and feminist victories during UN-conferences. Yet, I have shown that the activists in the World March of Women in Southeast Asia were able to formulate visions that transcend these divisions and share mutual aspirations without claiming complete identification with the other. Some

of these experiences were frustrating and could be considered failures, but the most interesting aspect of these experiences for the theory of solidarity across difference are not the acts in themselves but the activists' readiness to reflect their own practice in accordance with the needs of an 'other'. It overcomes essentialisms such as the local community/the state through active work of seeking common interest across difference (generalization of solidarity). The global in this context provides a politically charged common horizon for change rather than an analytical 'level' defined as a given geographical entity. By constructing such a global horizon, the activists of the World March of Women overcome cosmopolitan ethics by politicizing difference and particularism. The global and the local are, in effect, political devices. When they are reflexively used, solidarity across difference can be constructed 'in between'.

## Notes

1. Dhawan (2013) suggests that cosmopolitanism mobilizes a logic in which 'we are all in the same boat'. While there are very different understandings of cosmopolitanisms, for the sake of this argument I use the concept of cosmopolitanism, in line with its critics, to refer to a worldview that assumes equality by focusing on the commonalities of all humans while disregarding their differences.
2. I have observed this in several activist networks connected to or arising from the WSF context.
3. See Adamczak (2018, p. 226) for a complementary conception of solidarity in between the totality (of the state) and individualism (of a single person) for revolutionary theory.
4. Thanks to one of the reviewers for this suggestion.
5. See the website: <http://www.solidaritasperempuan.org/tentang-sp/profil-solidaritas-perempuan> (accessed 27 March 2020).
6. See the website: <https://geraklawan.id/> (last access 27 March 2020).
7. This also led to a different analysis of sex work compared to other groups belonging to the World March of Women. While many other national movements and traditions see sex work as an underregulated but legitimate form of economic activity, most Filipina activists are highly critical of sex work in principle, arguing that the position of legalization misses 'the reality of patriarchy' (Enriquez, 2015).

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