

Feminisms: A Global History

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The historian Lucy Delap, author of *The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic Encounters of the Early Twentieth Century* [2] (CUP, 2007), winner of the 2008 Women's History Network Prize, has now published another book—*Feminisms: A Global History* [3] (Penguin in the UK, and the University of Chicago Press in the US). This book, at nearly 400 pages, is a truly global history, dealing with 250 years of feminisms. Readers will find here a profound analysis of feminism across Africa, Asia, Australasia, the Americas, and Europe, though Delap takes a non-Eurocentric approach.

This journey across the globe is eloquently accomplished and begins with the assertion of an unknown African woman who published an article in a local newspaper in 1886: 'We Ladies of Africa [...] Although we have not white or angelic faces we are capable of as high a degree of culture as any white lady' (p.1). Following recent events in the Black Lives Matter movement, this quotation provides an echo and sets the tone for the book, which travels back and forth from 1886 as it traces the complex history of feminisms. To de-centre (Delap does not use this term, leading this reader to wonder why) the historiography and focus on those countries that have received less attention is a challenge to which this book rises very well.

Divided into eight thematic chapters, titled Dreams, Ideas, Spaces, Objects, Looks, Feelings, Actions, and Songs (the plural is important just as is the use of the plural, feminisms, is in the title), this global history examines feminisms across a broad canvas, alternating 'between wide-angle summaries of different feminist beliefs or campaigns, and close scrutiny of the lives of individual women who fought against gender inequities' (p. 21).

Three apparently simple questions are asked on the cover of the book: How has feminism developed around the world?; What have feminists achieved?; and, What can we learn today from global histories of feminism? The book then demonstrates that the answers to these questions are not homogeneous, with Delap managing to clearly draw out the complexities of feminisms in different global contexts. Benefiting from a flurry of recent historical publications available at the Cambridge University Library, which the author describes in the acknowledgements as a 'treasure trove of histories of feminisms' (p. 349), this well-written book offers a sophisticated approach to the plurality of feminisms.

Delap explores the multiple facets of feminisms through the metaphor of the mosaic, which is: 'built up from

inherited fragments but offering distinctive patterns and pictures [...] And like mosaics, feminist coalitions were built up from the bits and pieces available—other movements, committed individuals, actions and ideas. Some mosaics have been long-lived; others have crumbled, and their tiles have been reused, or have disappeared from view’ (pp. 20–21). She also notes another metaphor on conversations: ‘Metaphors of mosaics and conversations give a sense of the richness of feminist debates’ (p. 22). In doing so, Delap engages with the debate on the many metaphors used by scholars in discussion of feminisms, and challenges the best-known one, which employs the image of ocean waves: ‘The historical organizing frame of “feminist waves” has not proved up to the job of making sense of the complexities of feminist history’ (p. 5). Instead, she highlights the significance of a metaphor employed by the historian Nancy Hewitt, which uses the imagery of feminist *radio waves*:

Hewitt suggests that rather than seeing successive “ocean waves” of feminism, we might imagine competing, simultaneous broadcasts, some loud and clear, others disrupted by static. This helps capture the global multiplicity and inequality of voice that was poorly captured by tired talk of first, second and third wave feminism. Radio broadcasts are not neutral but can be creative, innovative and even vitriolic. The “radio waves” metaphor is suggestive of the disagreements between feminisms. But it reminds us that we can literally or imaginatively hear feminisms, through their shouts, keening, music and song (pp. 331–2).

Delap is also keen on the feminist radio waves metaphor because it allows us to hear the many voices of feminists, which is the topic of her last chapter: Songs. This is not an easy task for historians: ‘Trying to recapture what the women’s movement “sounded like” is difficult at a historical distance. Nonetheless, refusing to see feminism only as a textual affair is important’ (p. 331). Following this approach, Delap also provides insights into objects and looks, through chapter four and five, respectively. These chapters lead the reader onto the matter of archives, which are fundamental for historians.

The book questions the classification and content of archives: ‘Archival materials, where they document feminism at all, tend to lean towards the story that more powerful and privileged feminists have wanted to tell’ (p. 6). This assertion applies particularly to the first chapter, Dreams: ‘Very few dreams are recorded in historical archives [...] And, of course, those written down are those the dreamer chooses to share’ (p. 49). These thoughts about the enormous dependence historians have on archives recalls the mosaic metaphor:

But mosaic pieces may be lost, destroyed or buried, and their survival is not just a matter of chance—it depends on access to power and resources. The records of feminist protest and ideas are not well archived for the poor, working-class, migrant or ethnic-minority activists who sought change. That means that all feminist histories will be partial affairs, skewed towards those who wanted to or were able to claim the mantle of feminism and who could make their voices heard. The more marginalized, or those who were wary of being termed a “feminist”, are obscured. Nonetheless, a self-consciously global, critical history can attend to and preserve what has survived, and point to the missing mosaic tiles (p. 342).

Inspired by the growing scholarly interest in how locations and spaces shape social movements, chapter three explores the idea of feminist places: the libraries, women’s centres and bookshops ‘such as the Women’s Press in London (1977), Women and Children First in Chicago (1967), the Shokado Women’s Bookstore in Kyoto, Japan (1975), the Libreria delle Donne di Milano (1975), Streelekha in India (1984) and Binti Legacy in Nairobi (1996) have formed a powerful network for the distribution of feminist ideas’ (p. 127). Chapters two (Ideas) and seven (Actions) respectively, analyse the theoretical resources that feminists have created, and their many means and methods of protest.

Intersectionality is at the core of this book and has influenced it deeply: ‘The idea of “entangled histories” has been used by global historians to capture the ways in which ideas, people and texts crossed and re-

crossed borders to create multiple “intersections” (p. 20). Though the term ‘transnational history’ is not used even once in the book—and it would be interesting to know the reason for this—the words ‘transnational’, ‘transnationalism’, and ‘transnationally’ appeared sporadically, while some important works on transnational history are referenced in the notes and further reading sections. From the perspective of this reader, the book makes a fascinating contribution to transnational history:

...historians of feminism must take care not to erase the local specificity of struggles and activism. However, it would be a mistake to simply look at all these debates and movements in isolation; they often shared key ideas or drew inspiration from each other’s struggles. We can chart the rich interweaving of global debates on the relationship between gender and power, at the same time as recognizing feminism as a deeply historical and context-specific phenomenon (p. 10).

This value placed on the study of the specificities as well as on global debates is at the heart of the transnational approach. This approach is also evident when Delap argues: ‘histories of feminism cannot be located only within single nation states, regions or empires. Global influences have been based on the migration of individuals, as refugees, students, exiles and workers [...] Historians have become newly attentive to the deliberate cultivation of transnational spaces, in the pages of globally circulating periodicals, in conventions, conferences, alliances and federations’ (pp. 18–9). Delap insists on local diversities: ‘Local diversity has meant that the emergence of organized demands for change happened in very different ways all over the world. Where they existed, “feminists” spoke for different groups, and in diverse registers. “The women’s movement” or “woman question” was the terminology of nineteenth-century Europe and the Americas, while “women’s awakening” was widely debated in Middle Eastern and North African countries in the early twentieth century’ (p. 10). Delap’s preference for the expression ‘global history’ is obvious throughout the book, as in the title: ‘A global history approach also allows us to see the interactions between globally famous texts and local intellectual or activist traditions’ (p. 19).

Conflicts within feminisms are not put aside: on the contrary, they form a cornerstone of the book, and Delap’s encourages the normalisation of conflict: ‘A global history of feminism, as historian Mrinalini Sinha has insisted, will not simply pluralize our picture so that we think in terms of “feminisms”. Instead, our account of feminisms must acknowledge what Sinha terms the “discrepant histories of different women’s movements”, marked by contests, conflicts and power-play’ (p. 22).

Regarding the definitions of feminisms, Delap seems skeptical and prefers to emphasise the varieties of meanings that may change over time: ‘Though it was often defined in highly various ways, “feminism” as a term was adopted globally in the early twentieth century. It might refer to women’s “rights” as well as to campaigns of women’s advancement, protection and equality’ (p. 10). She notes that: ‘Across the world, there was fascination with this new concept, as well as suspicion of European or American influences. [...] The meaning of “feminist” has continued to evolve, and to be controversial. Activists in the 1970s and 80s often preferred to talk of “women’s liberation”, since they associated “feminist” with reformist “liberal” politics of parliamentary rights and suffrage’ (p. 12). Delap insists on the pluralities of feminisms, while noting:

Despite the many varieties of feminisms, one of the overarching feminist dreams has been of a movement that could span all women: “Helping each other, all of one mind”, as the Chinese banner declared at the 1913 conference of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance. This fantasy has carried with it the paradox of an abstract political agenda that, in its very inclusivity, ignores concrete exclusions (p. 13).

Delap rises above such quarrels as ‘who can be considered feminist?’, ‘who was the first in their domain?’, etc. She argues, convincingly, that: ‘We need not engage in a competitive struggle to identify the first, or the

truest, feminists. Instead, we can trace out experiences of exclusion and difference amongst gender and social justice activists, and chart their passionate, painful or strategic coalitions' (p. 14). She also properly questions 'the problematic idea of "backwardness"' (p. 17), and makes us aware of anachronism and the need to avoid measuring the past by today's standards, even if 'there may be aspects of the feminist past that make us uncomfortable today' (p. 23).

Another important insight worth mentioning is the emphasis on non-linear history. The book is not a narrative of the various demands raised and gradually met through the years. Delap reminds us that: 'Rights won did not always stay won, and often needed defending or regaining after setbacks' (p. 335). It is important to take the different political contexts into account:

Yet women's experiences around the globe during the twentieth century were of painfully slow reform, withdrawal of rights when they experienced wars, coups and dictatorships, pervasive everyday violence, and the mockery or outlawing of feminist voices' (p. 263). She uses feminism as 'an entry point to understand better how campaigns over "women's rights", "new womanhood", "the awakening of women" or "women's liberation" might have shared concerns and tactics. But I will also be telling the story of the limits of feminism, its blind spots and silencings, its specificities and complicities (pp. 2–3).

Once again, Delap alerts the reader to the complexities of feminisms that cannot be summarised simply through successive struggles and achievements, and she refers to the work of historian Kathryn Gleadle, who 'invites us to think of feminist history as a non-linear rhizome root structure, full of unexpected growth points, dead ends and patterns of influence' (p. 20).

Throughout the book, Delap wants to demonstrate the importance of male figures because 'to ignore men's and women's cooperation would be a deliberate historical effacement, as well as a loss of hope for future change' (p. 339). Consequently, she notes that, in this book: 'we will meet men who have worked to advance women's rights, often through deep personal investment in feminist goals as also benefiting men' (p. 8). One paradigmatic case is that of John Stuart Mill, even if justice is done also to his wife Harriet Taylor Mill.

The book fully achieves the challenge its author sets, to trace 'the evolution of global feminist themes that span a remarkable range of concerns: women's rights to property, education and citizenship; pacifism, antifascism, the welfare and protection of mothers and children; social justice, labour rights and human rights; sexual autonomy, cultural expression and reproductive rights' (p. 334). Delap concludes that a 'recognition that feminists have not agreed on a single programme in the past can help reduce the toxicity of today's disputes' (p. 344).

This path-breaking book is an essential read for those who believe 'we should be suspicious of attempts to flatten and simplify the landscape of feminisms, or to ignore its irredeemable ideological differences' (p. 343). As such, it is a masterful contribution to 'some important new ways of reading feminist practices and ideas across historical time' (p. 21). Delap's understanding of feminisms around the world offers fascinating insights, based on innovative sources, establishing this volume as a landmark work in the current historiography, and one that is both accessible to the experts in the field and inspiring for a broader audience.

Additional image: Women gathering for the 1956 Women's March, Pretoria, South Africa

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/334091> [2]

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