

May-2009

Book Review: Feminist Conversations: Women, Trauma, and Empowerment in Post-Transitional Societies

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Recommended Citation

Shupiko, Denise (2009). Book Review: Feminist Conversations: Women, Trauma, and Empowerment in Post-Transitional Societies. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(4), 315-319.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss4/23>

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Feminist Conversations: Women, Trauma, and Empowerment in Post-Transitional Societies. 2009. Dovile Budryte, Lisa M. Vaughn, and Natalya T. Riegg (eds.). Lanham, MD: University Press of America. 179 pp. Index included. \$28.00 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Denise Shupiko¹

Feminist Conversations: Women, Trauma, and Empowerment in Post-Transitional Societies, edited by Dovile Budryte, Lisa M. Vaughn, and Natalya T. Riegg, offers a fresh approach to transnational feminist discourse by bringing together voices of scholars and practitioners (and those who combine these roles) from Eastern Europe, the United States, Africa, and Latin America to explore the traumatic and empowering aspects of democratic transitions from women's points of view. The book disrupts traditional frameworks of transnational feminist exchanges, i.e., East/West and North/South, by facilitating a conversation among contributors from all of these geographical areas. As its title suggests, the book is indeed structured as a "conversation" among women and men working on issues of women's trauma and empowerment. It starts and ends with dialogues among the editors, and its three sections serve as a conversation among all contributors, with commentaries following each chapter.

The "post-transitional societies" discussed in the book include Lithuania, Poland, Armenia, Guatemala, Tanzania, Cote d'Ivoire, and South Africa, which began to democratize in the late 20th century. Cases from Egypt and the U.S. are included for purposes of comparison. In the introduction, the editors note that transitional processes result in traumas, such as "loss of family members during violent political conflict, increase in domestic violence, sexual trafficking, and difficulties in market pressures" (4). In addition, they contend that transition in itself can be traumatic, as the familiar is replaced by the unknown. In contrast to most literature on empowerment, including Western psychological theories, which view trauma and empowerment on the micro (individual) level, this volume emphasizes the macro (community and societal) aspects of these phenomena. As stated in the introduction, "If trauma is viewed as socially embedded, that implies that healing and empowerment must encompass various societal spheres and levels, manifesting themselves through economic, social and political phenomena, on community and governmental levels" (4). The book's chapters are organized into three parts: Part I: Reflecting on Trauma and Empowerment: Theories and Practices, Part II: Living Trauma and Empowerment: Stories and Strategies, and Part III: Authentic Voices: Nothing Lost in Translation.

The book appears at a time when "transnational feminism" has rapidly become a major focus of women's studies programs in the West and when the effects of "feminismization" components of democratization projects are being felt by women activists in post-transitional societies across the globe. Although the specific impacts of democratization practices vary in local contexts, this volume's contributors share a concern regarding the colonizing nature of "women's empowerment" projects exported from the West to the Rest. In the introduction, the editors introduce the theme of the

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“seemingly counterintuitive ‘aporia of democratic empowerment’ along the lines of democracy versus democratization” (2). They employ this theme to illustrate that democratization projects are, in fact, undemocratic in imposing Western values in diverse locales without listening to the voices of the people being “empowered” or respecting the cultural and political traditions of the nation being “democratized.” Because such projects devalue local culture and are incapable of meeting citizens’ needs in post-transitional societies, there is a great deal of resistance to ideologies associated with democratization, including to “feminism.”

Paralleling the book’s “conversational” format is the “communicative” approach to empowerment it proposes. In contrast to “liberal-democratic” methods of empowerment that are exported wholesale to women in post-transitional societies, the communicative approach, as described by Natalya Riegg in the first chapter, respects the identity and agency of women in a given society. In place of the “subject-to-object” communication practices characteristic of Western feminist workshops in post-transitional societies, the communicative approach endorses “subject-to-subject” communication, which encourages women to “present their narratives, to tell the stories of their lives, rather than to learn the proper way to live” (22). Riegg argues that such communication could empower women around the globe as they begin to understand each other and could be more effective at addressing the specific oppressions that women experience in diverse locations.

A major theme uniting the remaining chapters in the book is the disjuncture between social policies that promote gender equality and the lived experience of women. As mentioned by several authors, international pressure has led many smaller states to sign such agreements as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action; however, societal structure and cultural norms have frequently worked against full state compliance with the provisions of these conventions. In a comparative analysis of Lithuania and Armenia, Dovile Budryte concludes that, although transnational movements against domestic violence have led these governments to devote more attention to gender violence, they have not resulted in significant change in public attitudes and social and familiar structures that demand silence regarding this “private” issue. Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala reaches a similar conclusion in her chapter on sexual violence in South Africa. While democratization has resulted in multiple laws to protect women’s rights and contributed to an increasing number of women in political positions, South Africa’s women suffer disproportionately from the effects of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, hunger, HIV/AIDS, and violence. To address the disconnect between women-friendly policies as proclaimed in laws and as implemented in communities, Budryte argues that local actors must take the lead in finding solutions that are suitable for the particular history, traditions, and interests of their society.

Another invaluable contribution of the book is its description of specific empowerment strategies utilized in various societies. Kate Wells discusses how a small group of rural craftswomen from Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa employed traditional modes of expression, beaded dolls and tableaux, to express their viewpoints on taboo and traumatic issues related to HIV/AIDS. Through the sale of their crafts, the women earned income for their families, which helped them garner support from their male partners for participation in the craft workshops. Lisa Vaughn and Gabriela de Cabrera examine the

trauma and empowerment strategies of women, especially widows, who survived the 36-year Civil War in Guatemala. Among a variety of community-based groups, art cooperatives have been founded in Guatemala in which women weave textiles and make other crafts to sell to tourists. Like the craft workshops in Kwazulu-Natal, these cooperatives enable women to express their pain and suffering through a traditional artistic medium, to become economically self sufficient, and to organize in groups with other women, which facilitates their activism on other issues important to their community. Because post-war trauma pervades Guatemalan society and large numbers of women are suffering from post-traumatic stress, Vaughn and de Cabrera argue that empowerment strategies must occur on a community level. Commenting on Vaughn and de Cabrera's chapter, Wells writes that both "projects and cooperatives have a unique and most powerful function which affords women a degree of economic individuality and freedom... If, at the same time, traditional skills are being nurtured and preserved, then 'transformative empowerment' has surely been attained" (98).

Mary Beth Looney provides a third example of art as an empowerment strategy in her chapter on a student art installation at Brenau University in Georgia, U.S. She discusses the situation of "Amanda," a studio art major participating in an installation project entitled "Confined Spaces," which explored the issue of entrapment. While Amanda was working on the project, her fiancé began to exhibit increasingly abusive behavior, and, after the installation was completed, Looney learned that Amanda had spoken honestly with her family about her relationship and called off the wedding. Although Looney does not claim that participation in the project empowered Amanda to make this decision, she draws attention to the parallels between art and life. As the only chapter examining a Western context, this chapter stands out from the rest. Indeed, Dovile Rukaite, who commented on the chapter, argues that a "Lithuanian Amanda" would find little support for speaking about such an issue. She notes that most women addressing personal issues "are less fortunate than Amanda who was able to explore her own personal life in a spacious Victorian house" (116). The dialogue between these two authors points to the different life situations and opportunities available to women in Western and post-transitional societies, but also offers an initial step towards "subject-to-subject" interaction as women's narratives are shared on an equal basis. As such dialogue continues it is important to avoid "freezing" emerging narratives, i.e., using Amanda's story as a template that other women in abusive situations should follow.

Feminist Conversations illustrates how democratization processes have both enabled the growth of national and transnational women's movements and have threatened to jeopardize the "democratic" nature of these very movements. As have other scholars on women's movements in post-transitional societies, Budryte, Vaughn, and Riegg underscore the importance of listening and understanding among women from different social contexts. In the conclusion, they point out that women in post-transitional societies are not voiceless, but are often "unheard," as more powerful, more privileged women fail "to listen to their voices in places where women speak" (165). This conclusion echoes recent scholarship on post-Soviet women's movements. For example, in a study on women's health care in Russia, Michele Rivkin-Fish writes:

It is necessary to find women located at a variety of sites, not just those easily available to Western visitors, and to learn multiple *ways of hearing*

about their experiences. Westerners must conceptualize collaboration not just as the delivery of professional expertise but first and foremost as the building of relationships based on shared understandings. One step in this direction might be to include viewing the act of dialogue and debate as a democratizing project in and of itself—and even as a required step in developing future collaborative projects. (Rivkin-Fish, 2004: 309)

While *Feminist Conversations* reaches conclusions similar to those in recent works on transnational women's organizing, it surpasses these works by putting theory into practice. Moving beyond calls for more democratic communication among women's rights activists and scholars, Budryte, Vaughn, and Riegg designed the book as a forum to facilitate such communication. And in this task, they succeeded. Scholars from diverse disciplines and practitioners working on multiple aspects of women's empowerment contributed their voices to the book, and, even more importantly, they listened to other's contributions and respond in ways that are respectful of one another's differences. In addition to serving as a productive model for future cross-cultural dialogue, the book's other strengths include its focus on women's empowerment in less-studied states; comparative analysis among societies in the "West," "East," and "South"; and its understanding of the need for balance between "practical gender needs" (women's need to heal from trauma, which is often apolitical work) and "strategic gender interests" (the desire to challenge the political structures that contribute to women's exploitation) (157-158). As a seminal book in its field, *Feminist Conversations* leaves open many gaps that need to be filled. There is obviously much more that could be written about women's empowerment in areas of the world that are not represented in this volume. In addition, with the short length of the books' chapters (few are over 10 pages), even those topics examined in the book could be covered in greater detail. Finally, future efforts to bridge cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary boundaries among those working for women's rights should further develop theoretical frameworks that demonstrate the importance of such pioneering projects. In this volume, Budryte, Vaughn, and Riegg only briefly discuss their attempt to merge the action research model with the deliberative democracy model (5). It is my hope that, as the field of transnational women's studies and activism grows, feminist scholars will utilize and expand the "conversational" method of knowledge sharing on a range of issues important to women across the globe.

As an interdisciplinary text, *Feminist Conversations* could be employed in both undergraduate and graduate classes examining post-transitional societies, democratization processes, and women's empowerment. It could serve as a main text in women's studies courses exploring transnational themes. Lastly, the book could be useful to practitioners working in the field of women's empowerment and to women activists interested in cross-cultural collaboration. As a conversation among diverse contributors from various geographical regions, the book should find broad appeal in many progressive communities.

Work Cited

- Rivkin-Fish, Michele. 2004. "Gender and Democracy: Strategies for Engagement and Dialogue on Women's Issues after Socialism in St. Petersburg," in *Post-Soviet Women Encountering Transition: Nation Building, Economic Survival, and Civic Activism*. Kathleen Kuehnast and Carol Nechemias, eds., Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, pp. 288-312.