

MAPPING FEMINISM: A BRIEF ESSAY AND COMPARISON OF THE FORMS OF FEMINISMS ON THE ROAD

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Abstract: Any academic, who places themselves within the prolific field of interdisciplinary research, faces the drama of having to eventually narrow down their career path to fit into canonical departmental structures. Similarly, the bureaucracies of daily intellectual work have an impact on social movements often creating barriers and jargons that can become unrealistic to the community it seeks to serve. Such is the case of feminism in academia. Dozens of articles testify to the difficult communication that exists between thinking feminism and trying to apply its ideals into the machinery of daily life. In this essay, I will attempt a comparison between different forms of feminisms in a diversity of contexts and cultures. Its main argument is that feminism, understood as a major form whereby people seek to bridge the gap created by gender inequality, escapes the very jargons that define it and by which it has been intensely reassessed, ultimately gaining form in social actions that very often had no contact with feminist intellectual roots.

Keywords: Feminism; Academia; Theory

MAPEANDO O FEMINISMO: UM BREVE ENSAIO E COMPARAÇÃO SOBRE AS DIFERENTES FACES DO FEMINISMO PELO MUNDO

Resumo: Qualquer acadêmico, que se coloca no campo prolífico da pesquisa interdisciplinar, enfrenta o drama de ter que acabar por diminuir sua trajetória de carreira para se encaixar em estruturas departamentais canônicas. Da mesma forma, as burocracias do trabalho intelectual diário têm um impacto nos movimentos sociais, muitas vezes criando barreiras e jargões que podem tornar-se irrealistas para a comunidade que busca servir. Tal é o caso do feminismo na academia. Dezenas de artigos testemunham a difícil comunicação que existe entre pensar o feminismo e tentar aplicar seus ideais na maquinaria do cotidiano. Neste ensaio, vou tentar uma comparação entre diferentes formas de feminismo em uma diversidade de contextos e culturas. O principal argumento é que o feminismo, entendido como uma forma principal pelo qual as pessoas procuram superar o fosso criado pela desigualdade de gênero, escapa dos próprios jargões que o definem e pelo qual foi intensamente reavaliado, ganhando forma em ações sociais que muitas vezes não tiveram contato com raízes intelectuais feministas.

Palavras-chave: Feminismo; Academia; Teoria

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More reliably than anything else on earth, the road will force you to live in the present.
Gloria Steinem

Language is the repository of our prejudices, our beliefs, our assumptions.
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Writer, lecturer and feminist activist Gloria Steinem has spent her entire life on the road, at first, organizing committees nationwide to debate the women's movement during the 1970s. Later on as an advocate for gender equality and human rights, the American activist became a staple of the feminist movement in the United States, and gained respect and recognition amongst feminist circles worldwide. The road, as Steinem herself reveals in her latest book, is a formative element of her life and her activism;² the road is the reality of social struggles checking in with the traveller at all times. Steinem started out as a journalist, as a matter of fact as the usual intellectual who very often chooses a life of comfortable seclusion, writing about experiences, or profiling others' experiences, from the corners of their comfort zone. Yet, she asserts, the road has shaped not only her thoughts on the feminist movement (or her subjective experiences as a human being), but it taught her priceless lessons on diversity and the daily struggles of those who are at the very bottom of the pyramid of social oppression. Steinem is a "traveling feminist".³

As an academic feminist, a term often used in social media to designate those individuals dedicated to thinking feminism within the controlled environment of academia, it can become an easy habit to fall into the specificities of jargons and methods, getting used to problem-solving in the micro-scale frames of research. This (brief) essay is by no means a praise to immediate action versus intellectual work so much as it is a space for questioning and comparison. It seeks to compare and map, through experiences undertaken "on the road" by its author, the multiple facets of daily feminism, uncovering the creative ways that different social actors have developed to cope with gender inequality, and the violent consequences that stem from this social condition. This is an essay on testing and deconstructing jargons; it will not make use of well-known concepts feminist

² STEINEM, Gloria. **My Life on The Road**. London: Oneworld, 2016.

³ STEINEM, G. Op. Cit., p. xxix.

criticism commonly addresses, such as patriarchy and misogyny. Instead, it contests their efficacy against emergent realities, where being linguistically and intellectually aware of such concepts does not make much difference to the initiatives that seek to break the gender gaps that economically and politically hinders different societies. It will follow a simple structure, firstly outlining some case studies and examples of initiatives, mostly from individual social actors, related to feminism to finally, by drawing comparisons, raise some (in)conclusive questions about the matter. This is an essay on “traveling feminism”.

Before completing a PhD in English and Cultural Studies from King’s College London in early 2016, I had already started writing for a couple of media outlets on topics I usually label as “current women’s affairs”, which include feminism in its full spectrum.⁴ Doing a doctorate research in Medieval Studies (my main academic area) thoroughly teaches one how to read the obscurities of textual and discursive silences, also training them to read the silences of people, and this is a crucial skill for anyone dealing with minorities or social oppressions in whatever scales. While traveling through fourteen countries in a time span of roughly seven months, and meeting women from all sorts of social and educational backgrounds, those reading abilities became drastically enhanced in my own experience as an observer.

In short and general terms, the word feminism in and of itself is already a jargon, a Western jargon. The few times I could hear the word being spelled out loud were very contextual, it was during specific conversations about women’s issues, politics, a previous relationship experience, or while discussing reading tastes and experiences. This way, it was up to my trained ears to try to grasp feminism in conversations and cultures I was being exposed to, or, as I came to realize, it was not feminism I was trying to find, it was different *forms of feminisms*. At this point, it is crucial to clarify to the reader that the main goal of this seven months journey, which turned out to be a year long one, was not academic. In fact,

⁴ To access the content produced for Huffington Post Brazil, see <<http://www.huffpostbrasil.com/gabriela-cavalheiro/>>. Accessed: 6 May 2017.

stepping away from my previous academic work, and away from reading and experiencing cultures and ideas through some sort of “academic lenses”, was part of a learning and detoxifying process that had encouraged the whole travel. It was only by chance that I noticed I was bonding and seeking to speak to women about “women”.

The first time in many weeks I heard or spoke of the word feminism took place in a little coastal town in Montenegro called Budva, where an Australian occupational therapist on vacation explained to me in detail how gender policies are very blurred within Aussie government jurisprudence, and how that, in turn, affected her approach to the mental health issues of elderly patients, her focus group. Yet it seemed very clear that she was well versed in the intellectual roots of feminism as a social, political – and I add economical – movement, and comfortably relied in a governmental system that would, in one or another, promote gender equality and equal opportunities.

A second time feminism was conjured was in Istanbul, Turkey, during a conversation with a Kurdish nurse and activist. Coming from a poor family and being raised in a small town in the South East of Turkey, an area devastated by the ethnical conflict between Turkish and Kurdish military forces, this woman explained to me how, as a child, Kurdish children were segregated in her school by being forced to wear different colour uniforms. Despite economical struggles, she managed to find a way out of that violent context by seeking higher education in Istanbul, which she could only afford by working while also studying. She then revealed that she always engaged in conversations and discussions with colleagues, friends and even patients whenever she noticed sexism or gender related issues were taking place. Her tactics to spread the word about the movement was confrontation, a rather common approach amongst activists in a country where women have very specific and well-demarcated gender roles such as Turkey. Despite having an astonishing energy towards raising awareness about women’s social conditions in her country, the nurse did not have a clear sense of where feminism came from or how it took its (current) shape as a social movement. Interestingly, in order to identify herself as a feminist, she embraced some of the very features that over the years have become global colloquial

feminist stereotypes, like over criticizing other women for embracing said “feminine features”, like the usage make-up and marriage, elements commonly associated with women in the domestic and public spheres. In order to deny the institution of marriage, for instance, she revealed that she opted for a liberated sexual life, which she advertised in very public ways during conversations as a form of reasserting her position as a “free woman”. Another argument to contradict the Turkish social agenda, in her view, that women need marriage to gain economic stability, was to reassure her peers of her financial independence by engaging in a number of holiday breaks over the year during which she would often travel abroad.

It is not uncommon to see this form of activism, a “confrontational” social activism, ending up in different medias to be used as a distorted banner for the very cause it stands for.⁵ Moreover, it should be no novelty that social activism can take up many different forms and one does not need to advertise or be whole open about a cause they support in order for it to happen. Other times, confrontation is one of the only, or most effective, ways to actually engage with external factors and address problems in a very punctual, immediate way. Sometimes verbal and/or physical direct confrontation is the only language the oppressor can understand.

I spent about three months in total in Kazakhstan, one of the largest and most populated countries in Central Asia, and a very interesting case scenario for the purposes of this essay. A former Soviet Union territory, whose culture had been violently crushed by Russian cultural cleansing and that, today, struggles to revive a sense of ethnical identity through language and folklore, Kazakhstan was a bit of a puzzle to read. I had the opportunity to briefly meet some academics – an old habit that tends to reoccur – and become closer to one particular journalist who, at the time, was about to finish a master’s degree in media and international relations. As a young journalist aspiring to an international career, she thoroughly revealed to me the disturbing and authoritarian reality faced by journalists and government oppositors in the country. Where ideas about free speech, or even any

⁵ For an interesting read on the topic, see MILLER, Dale T.. Why Social Movements Should Favor Collaboration Over Confrontation. **Stanford Business**. <<https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/why-social-movements-should-favor-collaboration-over-confrontation>>. Accessed: 6 May 2017.

speech at all, are becoming more and more prohibited in a juridical system that persecutes and arrests any individual spreading words that do not please the president and his spokespeople, it is very unlikely that feminism would ever come to existence if we consider the very core of its meaning: freedom and equality. Women in the country face an immense gender gap: despite being very active in many different institutions and corporations, they never – never – occupy positions of power. However, it is the ways that they have embraced the very system that oppresses them that can be quite shocking to an untrained observer, but somehow expected for trained one.

Generally, in a context where women can actually access education and the job market, and manage to enjoy an independent way of life, it is this very independence that becomes a marker that success has not yet been achieved. Materiality, especially sartorial objects, is a staple of social status that is fiercely pursued by Kazakhs, generally in the urban context, but not necessarily in the rural landscape. Therefore, displaying cars, clothes, jewellery, and more recently, Western luxury labels are mandatory for urban Kazakhs to enjoy a comfortable social status. In that scenario, it was a remarkable realization for me that women only valued each other's success through evaluating how they materially present themselves in public, where the core signifier of such success comes from the male hands. Possessions only become symbols of success if they are passed on to the woman through male hands, preferably a suitor or her father.

The young Kazakh journalist I had the opportunity to spend quite some time with, was fully aware of how gender dynamics work in her country, and we were able to talk about such things in a very relaxed and uncompromised way. Nonetheless, despite having experienced part of her studies in the United States, and despite being an activist for free speech, herself a spokesperson for women's liberation from an oppressive gender system, there was no hint of feminism in her words. There was action in her writings and daily advocacy with colleagues and peers, but she never mentioned any kind of feminist readings or familiarity with the movement, or even the word feminism itself. Interestingly, it became more and more common to notice that many of the women I encountered in the country coming up with creative ways to avoid family pressures towards marriage, for

example, by moving to another city and seeking jobs to gain proper financial independence, as well as the mentoring of younger sisters in order to convince them to avoid the pressures of older generations (parents, grandparents). However, such changes, in most cases, meant a drastic separation from family members and a constant struggle to understand recognition in other ways that did rely on the male presence to take place.

Going back to Turkey, this time to Izmir, a city located in the most famous seaside of the country, I had the opportunity to visit refugee camps, where thousands of Syrian families are currently living. My visit was enticed by my work as an advocate for women's health and wellbeing, a role previously took on as a volunteer in London and that I carry on through my writing. The situation of the refugees in Turkey is strikingly different from those in Greece; living conditions are precarious and there are very few volunteers and organizations currently working on the field for a number of reasons, but mostly due to the government's severe position towards the refugee crisis in the country. I visited the camps accompanied by a Syrian interpreter and backed up by some local volunteers. Sitting in the tents, surrounded by dozens of women and young girls, me and my interpreter would engage in very delicate conversations about a rather sensitive matter: menstrual health. I enquired about their current (poor) sanitary conditions (see image in appendix 1) and they were coping with it and the answers were surprising. There is no room in this essay for graphic details about the testimonies, but they opened enough room for me to understand how they were also coping with their sexual life and the constant social and family pressures for having more children. Given the circumstances, they had close to little access to proper health care, which reflected directly on family planning, triggering a cycle of medical infections, unexpected pregnancies and, sometimes, miscarriages. However, to my own surprise and for the astonishment of other colleagues in the field with whom I disclosed some of the conversations, there were women embracing the little opportunities they had to have access to health care to ask for birth control mechanisms to prevent further pregnancies. Some secretly showed me empty blisters of birth control pills they had been taking without their husbands' awareness; another explained to me how she managed to get an Intrauterine

Device (IUD) insertion with a female gynaecologist in the local public hospital she had been lucky enough to encounter. Others shared different solutions to avoiding further pregnancies not because they did not want more children, but because they were perfectly aware they were living in absolute unsafe and temporary conditions that were not suitable for it. It is important to mention at this point that for the majority of Syrians, having big families is a strong cultural trace and does not apply solely to specific social groups, it goes all the way from top to bottom of the country's social pyramid.

Speaking to the Syrian women it became clear that family planning was a woman's affair and that men had very little or nothing to do with it, which is a common marker of gender inequality that usually places on women's shoulders the responsibilities of family planning and for their reproductive health. The volunteers on the ground, as well as many organizations, have no such approach to women's menstrual health. Not only are women neglected during the whole assistance process, but there are also layers and layers of judgment and assumptions that because those women come from poorer backgrounds and are Muslims they would interpret any conversation as a taboo, or carrying on conversations with them was simply unthinkable. The biggest mistake made by many organizations and volunteers on the ground, where most of the later seem very unprepared and not really interested in doing anything that would not benefit themselves, is to ignore the vital role that women play during moments of crisis and war.⁶ The majority of volunteers working in areas such as the rural refugee camps in Turkey come from European or North American countries and most of them have had access to higher education and engage in some sort of activism. Yet, it is astonishing to observe the total lack of connection between verbal or social media activism that both organizations and volunteers display, and the actual way volunteers interact with refugees. Feminism, women's empowerment or issues related to gender policies did not show up in any conversation, neither did women's affairs such as reproductive health, for example, a topic that only

⁶ For a few readings on the topic, see EL BUSHRA, Judy. *Feminism, Gender and Women's Peace Activism*. **Development and Change**, v. 38, p. 131-147, 2007; and CALLAMARD, Agnès. *Refugee Women: a Gendered and Political Analysis of the Refugee Experience*. In: JOLY, Danièle. **Global Changes in Asylum Regime**. London: Palgrave, 2002. p. 137-153.

gradually became more common amongst volunteers in the area, after other local actors became aware of the conversations I had carried out in the camps.

Nigerian writer and activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie constantly reiterates during public talks, and more recently in her book **Dear Ijeawele, Or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions**, the power of language as a repository, and I add replicating device, of cultural prejudices, traditions, assumptions and systems of ideas, a topic formerly presented in a quotation in the beginning of this essay. Feminism, as I have previously affirmed, is a jargon and “feminists can sometimes be too jargony, and jargon can sometimes feel too abstract”.⁷ If we compare the many sorts of agencies I have listed in the previous pages, from people who declare themselves feminists to people who are unaware of the word as a social movement *per se*, but still engage with its main ideas, one thing is certain: feminism as a social/political/economical movement is geographical and has a map. Never have I seen feminism more abstract than when I met volunteers in Turkey, where the speeches were completely emptied in face of the actions that were being carried out. And never have I felt feminism more concrete and functional than when witnessing Syrian and Kazakh women putting together creative and very personal ways to break a gendered agenda that would force them to participate in social roles they were not willing to do.

When Adichie says feminism can be too jargony, she is right. Being so attached to the intellectual side of the word as a concept does not necessarily convert into actions. However, the baseline of the movement, which is gender equality, can shape-shift into many different forms, as the examples above hopefully testify for. The reader might easily conclude that the whole point being made in the previous sentences is a rather obvious one. Yet I would like this “obvious assumption” to be taken further in more critical scenarios such as the common discussion that women who choose to wear *hijabs*, for example, need feminism. This implies a sense of hierarchy from one culture to another and removes agency from women in Muslim cultures, for instance, by acknowledging that their sartorial choices are totally and irrevocably guided by religious

⁷ ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. **Dear Ijeawele, Or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions**. London: 4TH State, 2017. p. 27.

oppression. The Syrian women I met in Turkey wear *hijabs* (or *ishar*, as they name it) in all sorts of styles and they were emphatic in explaining to me how the hijabs are formative to their ethnical more than religious identities and that to wear it or not was more of a form of self-expression than oppression of any form. Of course there are many different contexts and there are cases in which the use of that garment is indeed a form of gender oppression. But having experienced the direct contact with women who are actually living in a culture that adopts the *hijab* can change one's view completely on the matter and might help to avoid further generalizations, a healthier take on feminism, I would suggest.

As an experienced academic feminist, I could easily pinpoint moments where education and information would change mind-sets drastically and where feminism, the dictionary feminism often praised by Academia, would find a place. Yet it is crucial for anyone interested or completely immersed in the movement to realize that gender equality is a reality that more often than not is fought on a daily basis without the revolutionary influences of feminism. It is not very obvious to identify initiatives that are feminists in their root but not necessarily in their form or by their names. In the Balkan region, where I spent a good deal of those travelling weeks, one can easily notice the effects of the still recent ethnical and violent conflict that destroyed an entire generation of men, placing women in social positions they were not too familiar before. However, despite spending significant time with local women, such as a law student from Belgrade, Serbia, listening to her own experience as woman in her country, it was quite clear that gender related issues were far from debatable, and that there were certain social expectations that women still fought to fulfil instead of fighting against them. Yet I did see women in all sorts of social positions and, aside from the current economical crisis, well placed in the job market.

Each case I have detailed in the previous pages exposes a facet of feminism and an array of social actors trying to escape gender inequality by taking personal measurements, whenever there is lack of government structures and policy-making initiatives. For an academic feminist mainly worried about the directions the movement is taking due factors such as celebrity activism, excessive exposure in social media, a current fixation by fashion designers on the movement, the

voting outcomes of a political candidate who declares herself feminist, amongst many other intersections, it is very easy to lose track of the movement's core meaning: social change. If we compare the scenarios I listed here, we could easily deduct that there is no sense in such comparison when we are talking about completely disparate countries and specific experiences. Of course a Syrian woman relocated to a refugee camp does not encounter the same problems that a Kazakh executive does, nonetheless they are both female in their identities and as such, in their present, they have to face gender inequality despite their economic situation, and this is something women undergo globally. Gender inequality is a global problem and affects all levels of social living, and this is something very hard for many people to admit.

The bottom line here is that having a body that is gendered female leads to a whole different social experience, and what the women I had encountered during my travels have showed me, in concrete ways, is that, regardless their social status, they have agency over their own lives and they will comprise to feminist ideals without never having been exposed to it. When Gloria Steinem spent years in India, taking part in talking circles, she realized that real change comes not from the top, but from the bottom. There is no efficacy in discussing a “global politics of gender” if in the very core of daily life there is no action, a matter that many of us let easily slip during our intellectual battles.⁸ As a repository of our assumptions and ideas, to borrow from Adichie's terms, feminism easily lost its meaning amongst the volunteers in Turkey or whenever I tried to talk about it in its own terms with the women I spoke to. Now, talking about equal opportunities, about not being afraid of navigating a new city (a common conversation I had for practical reasons) these are ways of discussing feminism on a daily basis without having to resort to its intellectual jargons.

In geographical terms, feminism as a social movement labelled as it is still to this date very contextual: it is majorly Western – or “westernized”, as in the words of the Australian therapist I met in Montenegro – it belongs to certain social groups and demands access to certain educational patterns to be able to exist. When I

⁸ STEINEM, G. Op. Cit., p. 37.

noticed the term being used to create a slightly distorted image, which was the case of the nurse from Istanbul, for instance, it dangerously falls into the obscurities of misinterpretation and lack of information, which can somehow easily backlash. It is vital that activists from all sorts, more vocal, less vocal, more active, less active, bare in mind that talking about feminism does not mean “spreading the word”. Agency means more than beautiful speeches, but an inspiring conversation can also lead to a chain of events that will somehow meet the movement in the end. After leaving the refugee camps in Turkey, I partnered with two local volunteers and a US based non-profit organization to create a project and campaign to distribute reusable sanitary pads to the women in the camps. Before that, we had joined forces to donate underwear and new *hijabs* to the women as well. These actions could only come into being thanks to the conversations I had with the women, and there is no better agency than being able to disclose a problem in order to find a solution, which is what they have done by sharing their experiences with me.

Feminism as a synonym for gender equality, however, is everywhere. One can also mention sorority for the matter, but let us focus on what this essay has proposed: to think about feminism on the road. The initiatives displayed in this brief essay testify to the presence of feminist ideas and ideals in scenarios where social change is still in its primary stages, where feminism is not considered as a major actor because of the lack of education in the matter, no doubts about this. However, even if feminism still cannot reach corners of the world distant from where it was born and bred as a social movement, what it stands for does not escape the women fighting, or trying to avoid, gender inequality. It is crucial to acknowledge the existence of initiatives that are indeed completely aligned with feminism, even if the movement does not take shape as such in the context, in order to avoid generalizations and the occasional imposition of specific devices and discourses onto other cultures, such is the case with the *hijabs*.

The loose comparison outlined by this essay is an attempt to create awareness of the actual reach of our intellectual work and activism. Branching out to different contexts, *in loco*, and getting in touch with other social actors, is a healthy way to understand how far social movements can go and what forms they

can take. Outside of the controlled environment of intellectual circles and academic research, escaping the meticulous procedures of methods, feminism takes forms we cannot easily imagine. Gender inequality has violent consequences that our thinking process does not necessarily apprehend, and sometimes it is by following an actual map that we can finally begin to realize the dimension of the ideas whose impact we sometimes take for granted because of being immersed in a controlled environment. Gender politics takes place in daily life, escaping an ordered and familiar setting teaches us that, and that is what the road does to us, for us. Gender politics is deeply rooted in the domestic sphere and the public one is but a larger scale of what experiences are really like in a given scenario. It is only by incorporating feminism and turning it, adapting it into a device we can more comfortably manage in our daily, intimate, lives that real changes will begin to happen. It is from bottom to top.

Appendix 1

Image caption: One of the many sanitary pits used as toilets by refugees in a remote corner in one of the rural camps.



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