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Genders, Cosmopolitanisms and Rights Claims

Abstract:

This paper explores issues around the gendering of cosmopolitanism through a discussion of gender and rights claims in the Malaysian women's movement. A notable feature of the interest in the last few decades in cosmopolitanism has been the dearth of material directly addressing issues of gender and cosmopolitanisms. This neglect is highly interesting – over the same period, many gender-based movements around the globe have had to work painfully through accusations of universalism, ethnocentricity, neo-imperialism and worse towards versions of grounded cosmopolitanism, notably the idea of 'transversal politics'. The paper examines this awkward relationship between feminist scholarship and that on cosmopolitanism in the context of both a discussion of the Malaysian case and of the emerging possibilities and problems of an anthropology of cosmopolitanisms.

The recent political developments in Malaysia have added the impetus and urgency to strengthen women's participation in the cultural, economic and political life of the nation. We deplore the manipulation of ethnicity and religion, as well as the use of fear and oppressive forces to divide us. We want to contribute towards the building of a just, democratic and peaceful society for ourselves and future generations.

Women's Agenda for Change , Malaysia (1999)
http://wa4change.tripod.com/index.htm)

This paper explores issues around the gendering of cosmopolitanism through a discussion of gender and rights claims in the Malaysian women's movement. [1]A notable feature of the interest in the last few decades in cosmopolitanism has been the dearth of material directly addressing issues of gender and cosmopolitanisms. This neglect is highly interesting – over the same period, many gender-based movements around the globe have had to work painfully through accusations of universalism, ethnocentricity, neo-imperialism and worse towards

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A habit of neglectfulness

What questions should one be asking of the cosmopolitanism debates if one has an interest in gender? What is striking, indeed remarkable, is the very small presence of gender issues in the now voluminous literature on cosmopolitanism. Yet feminisms have made some substantial moves towards resolving some of the besetting difficulties within the debates, notably the development of ideas of 'transversal politics'. Cosmopolitan projects should have been much more interested in their experiences. So why were they not?

One always feels reluctant to embark on the querulous broken record routine regarding the inclusion of gender in theory-making. Yet as each new theoretical concern arises the question inevitably arises about the relationship of the particular concern to 'gender'. And as inevitably, it is an awkward one. This has certainly been the case in attempts to theorise the relationship of gender to cosmopolitanisms' famed stable mates 'modernity', 'post modernity' and 'globalisation': feminist theorists have seen the theorising of all three concepts as inherently excluding gender concerns, with attempts at inclusion posing awkwardnesses see Stivens (1998a).

Analysing 'gender' as an increasingly fractured and contested term, with multiple claims made on it, is a task for another paper. But the problems of gender blindness within the debates on cosmopolitanisms over the last decade may seem all too familiar in their main contours. How is it that we are still having to make these same kinds of arguments so far along into second, third and beyond feminisms? Is this simply ongoing androcentrism in some important segments of social theorising , by now well-documented, often in tedious detail, by feminist thought? Or is it a habit of neglectfulness that reflects continuing problems in the relationship between social theory and issues of gender? [2]

I find it interesting that after all this time, as yet only a tiny trickle of work is coming out which directly addresses the question of the gender and cosmopolitanism or the gendering of cosmopolitanism. This may partly be one aspect of the neglect of popular/vernacular cosmopolitanisms in the prevailing concern with the privileged and mobile individual cosmopolitan. But women and gender seem to be almost wholly absent from much of the theorising about the linked futures of nationalisms and cosmopolitanisms: a google search of the phrase 'gender and cosmopolitanism', as a phrase, produced no hits for work addressing the relationship between the two; similarly 'gendered cosmopolitanism' yielded only one conference paper (Peterson 2004) no 'gendering of cosmopolitanism', and only a handful for 'women and cosmopolitanism': these included an excellent paper 'Women and the New Cosmopolitanism', by Josna Rege (2003) two other projects on romanticism and on women in nineteenth century France .[3] There were lots of hits for sites which discuss both, but none for work specifically bringing them together as couple to be addressed directly. A search of expanded academic also produced some of the same results. (Both Pnina Werbner and I came to the workshop on cosmopolitanism that Joel Kahn ran at the Asia Research Institute in the National University of Singapore in 2004, with identical results, having each undertaken this exercise separately.) Pnina Werbner points out too that the study of women activists has been

'a glaring blind spot' in the new cosmopolitan literature, a point underlined by Catherine Eschle (2001) who suggests that the cosmopolitanism literature has been surprisingly uninterested in social movements overall.

But while the google count suggests a very low level of engagement with ideas of 'gendering cosmopolitanism'/'gender and cosmopolitanism', the count is far from infallible: some significant work by Mica Nava is in progress, for example (2002, 2003, and a book in progress *Visceral Cosmopolitanism and Everyday Culture: Imaginaries, Practices and the Normalisation of Difference in 20th Century England)*. In the 2003 piece, she describes the ways in which intimate relations between men and women of 'other' races can be characterised as cosmopolitan. There has also been a handful of interesting interventions in recent years that pointed our attention to significant attempts to 'think the cosmopolitan' (in a Kantian sense, Pollock *et al.* 2000a) by looking to feminism, or better feminisms. Thus in a *Public Culture* special issue on cosmopolitanism in 2000,[4] that later came out as a book, Sheldon Pollock, Homi Bhabha, Carol Breckenridge and Dipesh Chakrabarty suggest:

> Many of the key terms central to these debates— "universal," "theoretical," "abstract," "conceptual"—have been characterized as implicitly masculine because of their properties of mastery, distance from experience, indifference to specifics, and concern for absolutes in human life. These are the terms of a disembodied, free-floating, or generalizing scientific or humanistic thought. To focus, therefore, on these three historical practices is to ignore another pressure and inspiration to think the cosmopolitan, namely, feminism. Feminism has learned to wrestle with problems and attendant possibilities while struggling to keep the situated rather than the universal subject in the foreground.
>
> Thus, for cosmopolitanism, feminism may serve a role similar to but different from the other contested "isms" of the late twentieth century—nationalism, multiculturalism, and globalism—whose critiques are grounded in other economies and ideologies of difference and similarity. U.S. mainstream feminisms have noted that the "our" of our times is a noninclusive our that consists of able-bodied, white, heterosexual men.(Pollock et al. 2000b: 583)

There is a voluminous literature on transnational feminisms which is de facto dealing with 'cosmopolitanism(s), but mostly evades the term. That poses a further question: why has this feminist scholarship not embraced the 'c' word? I shall come back to that point.

Even when gender is addressed in some of the mainstream literature, however, the terms of inclusion can become quite problematic: thus Peter van der Veer in an argument about the 'old ' and 'new' cosmopolitanisms,[5] suggests (2002: 167) that '[i]n gender terms the cosmopolitan is obviously a man; an individual who has the ability to live anywhere and the capacity to tolerate and understand the barbarism of others'.[6] This echoes the emblematic, problematic figure of modernity, the equally male flaneur, equally the sole bearer of agency (Marshall 1994). This made me think and worry about why for van der Veer the cosmopolitan was so obviously a man, even if this designation was ironic: were 'women' (which women, where, when?) in his eyes always and forever by definition again (and forever?) without such agency?

The significance of the overwhelming absence of gender concerns from much of the 'mainstream (malestream) theorising around cosmopolitanism becomes apparent when we consider a series of highly influential feminist arguments: writers like Nira Yuval-Davis have argued convincingly for several decades now that the making of nation, culture/s, ethnicities, classes and new religions can only be fully understood when they are seen as gendered phenomena, constituted within gendered relations (Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis 1984, Yuval-Davis 1997, Lister 2003). Indeed, Pollock *et al.* note, as did Anthias and Yuval-Davis in a classic piece (1984) and many others before them, the now almost hackneyed mantra about the mutually constitutive nature of gender, race and class. Perhaps, ultimately many theorists of cosmopolitanisms in their ongoing neglect of gender as ever feared their own internal other, the 'feminine'.[7] As Joel Kahn has argued, many writers on cosmopolitanism argue that the cosmopolitan imperative must be grounded in culturally neutral terrains, 'beyond culture as Gupta and Ferguson put it' [cited in Kahn, 2006: 14]. 'Anything to do with the universal the transnational, the hybrid , the cosmopolitan or "complexity" presumes the possibility of deculturalised or culturally neutral spaces which one may enter after having left one's particular cultural coat at the door as it were'. One presumably also has to leave one's gendered coat at the door as well.

Yet the lessons of the painful debates within women's movements from the 1970s on are highly pertinent and offer many lessons for the political and moral projects of cosmopolitanisms. As Nira Yuval-Davis points out, the feminist movement has tended to be internationalist since the first wave of feminism: 'its cosmopolitan approach was expressed in Virginia Wolf's famous declaration "As a woman I have no country" (2004: 10). But she also underlines the point made by many feminist writers, that the struggle for women's equality and liberation frequently been formulated by many women's groups as part of their people's national and anti-colonial struggles (ibid). I am sure those at the conference will be familiar with the ways in which feminisms spent the two two decades after the 1970s engaged in the most painful debates about the proper path for the search for gender justice and rights (see for example Mohanty et al, 1991, Mohanty 2003). The most painful of these painful debates swirled around the hurt and upset that many self-styled 'third-world'/Southern feminists felt at the continuing exclusionary epistemologies and practices of many first world feminists: of particular concern were radical feminists and the neocolonial thrust of their pronouncements about genital cutting, foot binding, sati, and so. Long and tortuous –and tortured– debates proceeded, exploring the ways in which strategic essentialisms, unity within difference and finally transversal politics could work to construct a new feminist politics that acknowledged its late modern (second modern) –perhaps post-postmodern – situatedness in a world in a flux of unfixed identities. Perhaps in relation to all this, feminist scholarship is now very wary of the perceived universalism of cosmopolitanisms in their many varieties. And perhaps, too anthropology's ongoing awkward relationship with feminism continues to colour feminist anthropology's responses too.

Gendering Cosmopolitan Spaces

There are many other arguments to be made for gendering accounts of cosmopolitanisms. Let me just briefly discuss one significant area to underline the possibilities. I am especially interested in role of 'family'/kinship in the making of transnational family spaces: the relationships of migrant and transnational workers with their employers, their charges and the relationships they have with their own distant children have been the object of growing

scholarly attention, both to the social conditions of mothering and the emotional negotiations involved in the relationships – 'diverted mothering', Parreñas (2001a, 2001b) calls it – with distant families.[8] In her study of absentee mothering , Parreñas tells us that 35 to 54 per cent of the Philippines population is sustained by remittances. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild note in their recent book, *The Global Woman* (2003), the conversion of mothering into an object of global trade is an unprecedented phenomenon. Globalisation may not be very new, as many argue, but this internationalisation of mothering clearly is (see Stivens n.d.a for a discussion of new motherhoods in Asia). Ehrenreich and Hochschild estimate that some 30 percent of children in the Philippines (eight million children) have a parent who works abroad, and the majority of these parents are mothers. They are especially interested in the formation of a growing number of female-headed transnational families, in which core members live in at least two nation-states and the mother works in another country while some or all of her dependents reside in the Philippines. Pnina Werbner, writing about Pakistani cosmopolitans in Manchester, suggests that labour migration forges global pathways, routes along which Islamic and familial transnational worlds are constituted: the absentee Filipino mothers similarly forge new global pathways. These transnational worlds become concrete in the large gatherings of Filipino domestic workers, desperate for some fun on their rare days off , at the Star Ferry terminal in Hong Kong or at Lucky Plaza on Orchard Road in Singapore. In the last few years this shopping centre has been almost completely taken over by businesses servicing these migrant workers – forwarding agents, dressmakers and Filipino restaurants. These gatherings can be seen to form highly significant spaces, literally embodying a deterritorialised identity and space. The women's work is part of the panoply of practices like cross-border labour circuits (Sassen 2004: 264) which constitute globalisation. As Sassen points out, these circuits increasingly involve global women. They are deeply imbricated with some of globalisation's major constitutive dynamics: the formation of global markets, the intensifying of transnational and translocal networks, and the development of communication technologies that easily escape conventional surveillance – alternative circuits for survival. Arlie Hochschild suggests that the processes of migration for her interviewees in California construct new subjectivities–love for their charges that partly develops on American shores, informed by an American ideology of mother-child bonding and fostered by intense loneliness and longing for their own children (2003: 24). I think the mothering practices of the rising tide of international nannies for one pose some interesting arguments about the ways in which the intimate and domestic can configure cosmopolitan spaces and practices.[9] Pollock et al take up this issue , asking if cosmopolitanism seeks to take the large view, how can we think the intimate under its sign without restricting intimacy to the domestic sphere? In their view any cosmofeminism would have to create a critically engaged space that is not just a screen for globalization or an antidote to nationalism but is rather a focus on projects of the intimate sphere conceived as a part of the cosmopolitan. They suggest that such a critical perspective would also open up a new understanding of the domestic, which would no longer be confined spatially or socially to the private sphere (2000: 584). I have problems with what looks like a reification of the private here. Moreover , given the models of feminine abjection common in the migration literature, how far can we, contra these, claim such constructions of transnational spaces as possible sites of emerging agency and indeed cosmopolitanism?

Rethinking/Reframing Rights

At the end of the last century, Anthony Giddens declared the new millennium to be the Age of Rights. In proclaiming this, he was pointing to the many social movements around the

world that have moved to articulate their central claims in the language of rights, especially that of human rights. There has been a global proliferation of groups explicitly claiming their struggle to be a human rights struggle – thus we have seen claims that women's rights are human rights, that disability rights are human rights, that children's rights are human rights, that LGBTQ (lesbian, gay , bisexual, transgender and queer) rights are human rights and so on , claims also made by advocacy groups concerned with reproductive rights, disability rights, ecological rights, the rights of the ageing, land rights, and indigenous rights. These rights claims are clear signs of what many see as new universalising trends in global politics, including a new humanitarianism, which many interpret in part at least as a response to the traumas for the 'global community' of the Yugoslav and Rwanda tragedies.

One feminist attempt to deal with the postmodern and postcolonial deconstructions of universalising feminisms was a reassertion (and perhaps reinvention) of women's rights as human rights. Feminists worldwide moved strongly to lay claim to and expand the idea of human rights: the slogan 'women's rights are human rights' became a central claim of the global women's movement from the 1990s on; feminist theorists argued for an explicit inclusion of women and gender into human rights tenets; and United Nations forums became central sites of a new global feminist 'counter public', providing unprecedented avenues for feminist initiatives and action. One important result of the expansion of the human rights project has been that many of the concerns that women have put to the fore in the last three decades of feminist action worldwide have been recast as human rights issues (as in Katarina Tomasevski's 1993 volume on human rights, and many following).

Elsewhere, following Nancy Fraser, I have seen this project as both drawing on and reshaping a global feminist public in an avowedly neouniversalist mode (Stivens 2000a).[10] But I also saw a number of difficulties: what are the consequences of the development of this new global space? What happens to both the feminist and human rights projects when feminists adopt the concept of 'human rights' as the core claim of a global feminist politics? Would we see a collapsing of the two projects – the subsumption of women's gender interests-based politics in a reclaiming of the utopian (cosmopolitan)'human' within social movements where identity politics had been so prominent? The implications of this cosmofeminist politics are surely important for our discussions here.

It is clear, first, that the strategic use of UN forums, especially the women's and the Human Rights conferences as critical global arenas by feminists has in some senses been spectacularly successful: it has provided an unprecedented promotion of women's rights, interests and activism over the last twenty years, spurred on by the Vienna Conference and specific issue like former Yugoslavia. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have also made important interventions, dating from the late eighties, with very active Women's Rights projects. I am not suggesting that this engagement with the UN has not also been highly problematic: it has seen the subsumption of local concerns to hegemonic 'global' discourses, especially to the power of agendas driven by global NGOs. Gayatri Spivak recently underlined the widespread concern about such agendas (2004), suggesting that these UN spaces represent no more than a reiteration of old hegemonies. Nonetheless, in my view these international political mobilisations may still usefully be termed an international counter-public, a cosmopolitan space inseparable from globalisation/globalism, in spite of the continuing geopolitical tensions within feminist/womanist./women's movements and in spite of the highly problematic character of the UN. [11]

Nonetheless, as I argue elsewhere , many of the women involved in such struggles in the South reject postcolonial critiques of universalisms (Stivens 2000a, 2003): they see such arguments as suspiciously similar to the arguments made by their own, to varying degrees, authoritarian governments. They explicitly reject the depictions of their claims as universalist / 'western' ; they make clear claims in terms of a shared humanity that has many roots in global discourse and practice, and in a long history of global ideas about rights, justice and democracy(see chapters in Hilsdon, Mackie, Macintyre and Stivens 2000). This history includes the legacy of Christianising missions, for all their close links to imperialism, anticolonial nationalisms and liberation struggles, and engagements with contemporary liberal modernity. Some women's human rights activists distance themselves from specifically 'feminist' struggles: but many do not, making considerable strategic use of the multiple and complex links they have to the global feminist counter public. These links are very variable, ranging from the most tenuous fragile links between small local NGOS and the UN in some small Pacific states to the complex and multilayered large-scale Indian women's movement (ibid). A point to be emphasised here, however, is that women's struggles are not simply drawing on these long-circulating ideas – these women are engaged in a process of producing new understandings of such modernist notions as democracy and rights, a process of redefinition and reimagining of the very notion of rights (see Stivens 2000a, 2003).

Malaysian Women's Movements

Let me now turn to explore, albeit briefly, some of the dimensions of these issues in a concrete case from Malaysia, that of a section of the Malaysian women's movement, the prominent Islamic feminist /womanist group, Sisters in Islam.

(Tourism Malaysia slide). It is significant that this long-term Tourism Malaysia campaign commodifying and packaging Malaysia for foreign consumption specifically locates women as the symbolic keepers of culture and of the harmonious interweaving of the Asian continent's greatest cultures and civilisations within Malaysia: as I shall argue, ironically this may also be what some contemporary women's movement activists are aiming to do in seeking to construct transethnic political spaces within a society that some have described as hyperethnicised (see Martinez 2003).

In Malaysia in 1999 a number of women's groups, in an overtly proactive move, built on an earlier (1990) Women's Manifesto to draft a detailed 11-point document, the Women's Agenda for Change (WAC), which they presented with some fanfare to the government. The WAC represented a coalition of women's groups drawn from all the major ethnic groups and their respective organisations, including Jamaah Islah Malaysia (Wanita JIM), a Muslim women's organisation, Sisters In Islam, a reformist women's group working for women's rights within Islam (SIS), which I shall look at below, [the] All Women's Action Society (AWAM), Persatuan Sahabat Wanita Selangor (PSWS, a support group for women workers), Malaysian Trade Union Congress (Women [sic])Section), the Women's Development Collective (WDC, a 'progressive' women's group) and the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall (Women [sic] Section).

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fear and oppressive forces to divide us. We want to contribute towards the building of a just, democratic and peaceful society for ourselves and future generations.

The 11 points were:

- Women & Development
- Women & Participatory Democracy
- Women, Religion & Culture
- Violence Against Women
- Women & Land
- Women & Health Services
- Women & The Law
- Women & Work
- Women & Aids
- Women & Environment
- Women & Sexuality

The declared aims of the women's groups were to:

- draw attention to specific problems, issues and needs of women which should be recognised and addressed;
- raise awareness of women and men on the position of women in Malaysia;
- strengthen the political participation and voices of women in Malaysia so as to promote and achieve gender equality and to work for a just and democratic society; and strengthen a network of women's organisations and NGOs to work towards the advancement of the status of women in Malaysia.

The women sent the document to 192 members of parliament, asking them to endorse it and raise its issues as part of their election platforms. But the response was poor (Martinez 2003, Derichs 2005). Although Malaysia's political parties have a female membership of around 50 per cent , only seven members out of 192 replied to the WAC. Seeking an alternative strategy, the women planned an initiative to increase women's representation in parliament, the Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI), launched in September 1999, which garnered a number of votes.[12]

 The question arises here, however, what kinds of rights claims are being made. It is clear that in some senses these claims represent evidence for a growing willingness to make local versions of more 'universalist/universalising' rights claims (see Stivens 2003) within the complex and often tense relationships among a range of women's NGOs, the 'soft-authoritarian' state and the powerful cultural particularisms embedded in the Malaysian modernity project.

Dramatic economic and political changes – rapid 'development ' and urbanisation, the development of new middle classes, and large-scale female entry in to 'modern' occupations and education (see Stivens 1998b, 2000b), have produced a reshaping of the spaces within which Malaysian women can act politically as gendered agents. Concerted activism involving transethnic coalitions has been successful in working for laws relating to domestic and sexual violence (see Lai 2003, Martinez 2003). Rights claims on the state and on sections of 'civil

society' for a complex array of women's rights have become prominent within a wider push for reform, although the the *Reformasi* (reform) movement which arose in the late 1990s has stalled badly. Such claims, however, face especially complex terrains in making these demands: these include ethnonationalist pressures, notably in terms of a revivified, resurgent Islam among the Malay community: a complex politics of meaning around the many imaginaries of the modern, including an Islamic modernity, in which 'women' and gender occupy starring roles; extensive support for ideas about an alternative 'Asian way' to becoming modern; and the tangled and often tense relationships among a range of women's NGOs themselves, in which discourses of'ethnic' belonging and divisions have been central.

There is a number of disparate versions of the imagined modern– there is first the agenda of the state's New Economic Policy instituted in the 1970s with the aim of improving the situation of Malays, and its futurist child Vision 2020, according to which Malaysia would be a fully developed country by the year 2020. This mostly modernist project with its key developmentalist ideology somewhat contradictorily embeds much state-level rhetoric about the exceptionalism of Asian civilisation and 'Asian Values'), which expounded an explicit and unrelenting critique of the West. Ideas of re-invention are critical to ideas of the desirable modern: in line with the neo-liberal remaking of the world, state and consumerist rhetoric alike exhorts the citizenry to re-invent themselves as new Asians, invoking a further modern imaginary the New Asia/Truly Asia (Singapore embedded notions of the rapidly-transforming Singapore in the form of logos adjoining shopfronts a few years ago). Malaysia one-upped this with the *Malaysia Truly Asia* campaign in its recent advertising).[13]And adding a further layer of complexity there is an Islamic modern imaginary. The last few decades have seen a thoroughgoing Islamicisation of Malaysia. This process arose from developments in Islam globally and the rise of many Islamic organisations, notably *dakwah* (missionary) groups locally. But it was also strongly promoted within the state-driven modernity project. The state founded a well-endowed Islamic think tank, the Malaysian Institute for Islamic Understanding (IKIM), which was charged with shaping an Islamic work ethic (see Nagata 1994). There have also been moves to develop Islamic banking, Islamic industrialisation, many campaigns against forms of entertainment considered un-Islamic, including 'traditional' Malay song and dance forms, and controversial attempts in the states of Kelantan and Terengganu to introduce Muslim criminal law *(hudud).* The previous Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, and the present one, Abdullah Badawi, have both been keen to present Malaysia in a post- September 11th 2001 world as the very model of a moderate, modern Muslim nation. [14]

As I shall argue the term 'rights' within women's activism in Malaysia has been shifting, elusive and highly contested, deployed in a series of shifting meanings by a range of political actors. Most problematic for activists have been accusations – by both cynical authoritarian leaders and many writers on human rights – that [human] rights is a western concept, imposed by the global feminist community on hapless local activists and having little relevance or meaning in Malaysia and other areas of the 'South'. But as the WAC organisation website shows, they explicitly reject these arguments, and their initiative resonates with liberal and universalist discourses on human rights and democracy (cf Martinez 2000, 2003). I think it is interesting to speculate that such initiatives can clearly be read as overt moves to reconfigure ideas of rights within both the local and more global context of the strong (re)turn to rights claims within women's activisms globally (Stivens 2000a, 2003).

Sisters in Islam

Some of these dialogues can be illustrated by looking at the tactics and experiences of one prominent constituent group of the WAC group, Sisters in Islam. Formed in 1988, they have had a very large impact nationally and within feminist circles globally, receiving many overseas invitations to speak and holding a very successful workshop at the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995. A small group of tertiary-educated women, including anthropologist Norani Othman (see SIS website), they have very self-consciously positioned themselves as part of an internationalist movement working for a social justice agenda within Islam (cf Wadud-Muhsin 1992 for an account of this movement). SIS Forum's stated mission is to promote the development of [an] Islam that recognises equality between women and men and that adheres to the principles of justice and democracy: 'Sisters in Islam (SIS) is a group of Muslim professional women committed to promoting the rights of women within the framework of Islam' (http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/).

The group has operated very strategically, preparing submissions to pressure government (see these listed on its website http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/), organising important conferences on the Shari'a law, *hudud* (Islamic criminal law) and Islam, Reproductive Health and Women's Rights and making other interventions, all designed to contribute, [as their site tells us, to a 'more informed public debate on topical issues of concern]'. 'Our efforts to promote the rights of Muslim women are based on the principles of equality, justice and freedom enjoined by the Qur'an as made evident during our study of the holy text' (http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/). They run, for example, many study sessions; I went to KL in 2004 to talk about 'gender' in one of these. Such sessions are an important site for many interested liberals – mostly women – to talk about significant issues. SIS has now agreed to the membership of one or more men, however, as I understand it. As I write, they are embroiled in a national and international row about the new Islamic Family Law, which has cut back some former female rights. A recent meeting to discuss this included no less than three daughters of former Malaysian prime ministers, including Marina Mahathir, who declared that MalaysianMuslim women were living under an apartheid system.

SIS's main strategy has been to engage Malaysian society in a highly reflexive and participatory process of 'cultural' mediation or dialogue. They argue that this stands in a clear contrast to the 'secular' approach of arguing for rights on the basis of universal claims to human rights (Norani Othman 1999). Scholar-activist members, like Norani Othman, herself an anthropologist, have provided sharply conceptualised programs that involve finding sources for women's rights and internationally recognised human rights in the local Muslim 'culture' and religious teachings, while also questioning the meanings and implications of dominant cultural norms. As their website notes, their key objectives are:

> • To promote and develop a framework of women's rights in Islam, which takes into consideration women's experiences and realities;
>
> • To eliminate injustice and discrimination against women by changing practices and values that regard women as inferior to men;
>
> • To create public awareness, and reform laws and policies, on issues of equality, justice, freedom, dignity and democracy in Islam (see website http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/).

In 2003, for example, the explicit attachment not simply to 'rights' but to the global project of women's rights as human rights was underlined in a web posting 'Violation of Muslim Women's Human Rights: Further Discrimination Against Muslim Women Under the Selangor Islamic Family Law Bill 2003 Through Selective Gender Neutral Provisions, 29 May 2003'. It is especially noteworthy that SIS members have been given or perhaps better seized time/space as public intellectuals to debate important religious issues in the media, for example on television panel discussion shows: previously, Malaysian Muslim women were rarely given public speaking positions as religious 'experts'.

But there can also be something of a reality check when one asks how much popular support SIS has. Joel Kahn and I interviewed one hundred middle-class Malay households (in Seremban, Kuala Lumpur and Penang) as part of our research projects on Malaysian modernity. I interviewed forty of these households in Penang and Kuala Lumpur in greater depth. Eighty five per cent of these latter informants described themselves as Muslims. But a small number disavowed this identity, not a minor matter in the Malay Muslim context, where such admissions invite apostasy charges. A portion were living the Islamic resurgence at a very intense level: over a quarter were overt supporters of versions of revivalism, a figure which echoes national figures.

My middle-class informants' narratives present what is arguably evidence for a postmodernisation of Muslim identity and of Islamic practices within the shifting complexes of meaning surrounding the idea of an Islamic modernity in Malaysia. They have been offered, taken up, and created a range of positionings within the recent Islamisation of the country. These positionings have varied , from adherence to revivalism to reformist modernist Islam to somewhat more secular modernism, and even in a couple of cases, to repudiation of religion all together. Some of my informants' religious practices did provide evidence for arguments that radical Islam derives its support from those who feel dislocated; but their responses overall suggested much more complex scenarios. There was a substantial level of support for revivalism among these informants from the most 'modern' sector of the social structure, the new middle classes as a whole. I would emphasise, therefore,the diversity of the ways in which my informants located themselves in relation to Islamic revival and modernity. I would also underline the important ways that Islam and modernity (and gender) were often mutually constitutive of each other in their narratives. For a sizeable number, becoming more Islamic was the way to be a more modern Malay. But it was about being'modern' in ways that removed them from positioning as 'western', a particular issue for women. For SIS this means that they face everyday pressures in their advocacy that are considerably more complex than dualistic accounts of conservatives versus liberal religious polarities might suggest.

We can, I think, argue for what one might term an Islamic, cosmopolitan reimagining of rights as inherent in the Sisters project. Many Malaysian NGOs have been careful about using the language of 'women's rights', especially slogans like 'women's rights are human rights', given the political pressures against such terms. Activists themselves acknowledge that ideas of rights are often seen as problematic, not only within the state, but beyond it as well. But I think the Sisters have been to some degree successful in reconfiguring ideas of 'rights' within a fraught, delicate and constantly shifting engagement with a repressive 'soft-authoritarian' state and religious authorities. Their construction of women as the subject of more communitarian, culturally particularist claims to rights has clearly provided a bridge across

the longstanding divisions within the Malaysian women's movement between struggles for rights conceived of in more universalist terms and versions of a mediated womanism (Stivens 2003). This strategy has been much approved by some postcolonial critics, like Aihwa Ong (herself originally Malaysian), who see it as based in a communitarian feminism which engages local men in (re)defining gender rights within the framework of Islamic morality, nation and civilisation (1996).

It is also highly significant that Malaysian women activists have come together attempting to transcend 'ethnic' divisions: they have deployed 'local' versions of frankly modern ideas of rights and gender equality within campaigns to advance feminist/ womanist identities, including those within Islamic practices. Maznah Mohamad, for example, has also noted some willingness among members of [more 'conservative'] Islamic women's organisations to attach themselves to ideas of democracy and justice in their opposition to the government (2002).

One can argue that understandings of such concepts as 'rights' and 'democracy' within the Malaysian women's movement and the Reform movement more generally are very much a project-in- process, being constantly rescrutinised, reframed and reworked. Human rights claims cannot simply be written off as a straightforward western liberal and modernist imposition. To hold on to the idea that such agendas in Malaysia have been simply imported or imposed from 'outside', we would have to overlook the long history of Malaysian women's organisations and their ongoing conversations with nationalist, reformist and radical politics. Instead, we can usefully understand such rights claims as locally produced and locally reinvented over a long period of time in highly particular dialogues with a long and rich local and global histories of ideas about [human] rights, equality, justice and democracy dating to the colonial period and longer, with local forms of modernity throwing up their own specifically situated /rooted histories and politics. It is important to underline that recent campaigns have been locally produced and locally reinvented in a dialogue with these histories: these include religious missionising, anti-colonial nationalisms, liberation struggles and engagements with contemporary liberal modernity. The new struggles are not drawing on these histories in any simple way; they are engaged in a process of producing new understandings of notions such as rights and democracy – usually understood as highly modernist concepts – with local forms of modernity throwing up their own specifically situated /rooted histories and politics. The recent campaigns by women's organisations have clearly drawn on those histories, reworking and re-presenting them.

The specificities of local rights discourses and claims illustrate some of the slippages between apparently universalistic, ethical notions – in this case of rights with their long local histories – and their long-term historical reworkings in local contexts (see discussion in Stivens 2000a). SIS's highly reflexive strategy of making mediated claims for rights underlines the force of the argument that it is possible to transcend some of the polarities of the debates about universalism versus particularism and cultural relativism within global feminist politics by looking at how claims to rights are embedded –'rooted'/ 'grounded' – in highly specific, local contexts and struggles (cf Stivens 2000b).

The ways in which the Sisters have constructed women as the subject of more communitarian, culturally particularist claims to rights may have gone down well both with an authoritarian anti-western government and with some sections of the larger Malaysian public, the 'masses' of the more radical activists' perceived constituency. Some observers,

however, see some problems in a possible cooption of their Islamic 'modernism' by the state. It is certainly arguable that SIS views have been useful to – and explicitly drawn upon by – some government elements in the struggles with the Islamic /Islamist party PAS, Parti Se-Islam Malaysia, the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party), which had until the recent 2004 elections made headway in the northeastern states of Malaysia. (It is also the case that PAS had an uneasy relationship for some time within the opposition Reformasi alliance). While the members of SIS and of other women's organisations were cynical about the appeals to women made explicitly in the last election campaign, they also heralded gender relations as an overt site of national politics (see Maznah 2003). Indeed, the state appears to be deploying gender relations as a key site for politicking, with uncertain outcomes for women's movement aims (cf Stivens 1998a, 1998b, Maznah Mohamad 2003). By the time of the 2004 election, for example, it is reported that a Barisan Nasional (BN, the ruling government coalition) advertisement 'screamed'... 'A Yes to BN is A Yes to Women's Rights' (Saliha Hassan 2004), which suggests that the moves to attract women's votes had moved onto novel ground in Malaysia.

I think that it is significant, nonetheless, that in spite of rhetoric about rights as western impositions, and by claims of cooption, Malaysian women activists have felt increasingly willing and able to deploy 'local' versions of frankly modern ideas of rights and gender equality within campaigns to advance feminist/ womanist identities, including those within Islamic practices. This was marked in the 1999 Women's Agenda for Change initiative, for example, which as noted, resonates with liberal and universalist discourses on human rights and democracy (cf Martinez 2000, 2003). But it but is also apparent in the mediated interventions of SIS, and some Islamic women' organisations. Maznah Mohamad, for example, has also noted some willingness among members of [more 'conservative'] Islamic women's organisations to attach themselves to ideas of democracy and justice in their opposition to the government (2003).

The middle-class character of such NGOs, and their close links to global feminist circuits, agendas and funding are key factors. One can argue that Southeast Asian women's movement struggles have been increasingly linked to the 'global feminist counter public' that I proposed above. I see this as constructing itself around the international 'women's rights are human rights' push and making very strategic use of global networks and forums (Stivens 2000a). Member of many such NGOs frequently have sizeable engagements with cosmopolitan global networks, operating on a global stage. Local Malaysian commentaries on the women's movement in the country tend to be quite parochial, concentrating on the internal processes and politics, not least the 'ethnic' divisions that so dominate Malaysian political practices. This is understandable, but overlooks the considerable importance of SIS internationally, where it is widely known among both feminist and other women's organisations, and among Islamic networks. Moreover, its presence on the internet, an increasingly critical site for such politics-making both nationally and internationally is also crucial: all the pamphlets and documents it produces are available online. This global – cosmopolitan in several senses of the term – presence is significant for understanding the nature of its ideas and practices and of its constituencies.

The SIS project, however, points to the difficulties Malaysian women's groups have in finding spaces within which effectively to lay claims and in formulating future strategies. The WAC and WCI moments clearly contributed to an engendering of the democratisation process surrounding Reformasi in the country: the upshot has been a further complexification

of the dialogue between gendered rights and democracy. Some would see gains, including the appointment of a new minister of women's affairs she is now the Minister of Women and Family Development, after a change of ministry name...). There are, however, ongoing issues in the ways in which state relations attempt to manage opposition ideologies, activities and identities: the space of the 'public' has carefully delimited boundaries for the kinds of possible interventions and contestations around the relationships between modernity, the state, religion and women's place within them. There is now considerable pessimism on the part of NGOs, even while the large numbers of women entering higher education and new occupations reconfigure gender landscapes in the country. Many feel that it is only possible – or at least strategic – for Malay women at least to contest women's place from within a very circumscribed discursive and political space, given the continuing power of neo-traditionalist versions of Islamic discourse and practice in the current political conjunctures.

The recent coalitions and alliances within the women's movement in the country, in spite of all the strains and internal difficulties they have on occasion experienced, fit a common pattern in contemporary feminist and womanist practices: these are frequently a matter of alliances rather than of unified struggle around a universally shared interest or identity (Fraser and Nicholson 1990: 35). I have not seen the term used locally, but recent developments very much fit into the emerging emphasis within global feminisms on *transversal politics* (cf Yuval-Davis 1997) – the reconstitution of new versions of universalisms that transcend some of the old difficulties with difference. As Yuval-Davis has argued, transversal politics is based on dialogue and debate that take into account the different positioning of women (1997: 125). 'Concretely this means that all feminist (and other democratic) politics should be viewed as a form of coalition politics in which the differences among women are recognized and given a voice' (1997: 126). 'What is important, however, more than the name, is the realisation that transversal politics is not only a dialogue in which two or more partners are negotiating a common political position, but it is a process in which all the participants are mutually reconstructing themselves and the others engaged with them in it' (Yuval-Davis 2004: 27) While it is always problematic to prescribe solutions from outside, the idea of transversal politics has caused much excitement among feminists elsewhere and seems to me to aptly describe the practices of some sections of the Malaysian women's movement.

Concluding points

I have been asking why the cosmopolitanism literature has seemed so little interested in questions of gender, and in turn why some feminist scholarship has been wary about appropriating the c-word. I have asked in particular why the women's movements of the last few decades have so little presence in the cosmopolitanism literature, suggesting both habits of neglectfulness and theoretical awkwardnesses as factors. I have been arguing that these important movements necessarily constitute significant sites for exploring questions of cosmopolitanism in its many meanings.

I am not suggesting at all that questions of gender are only about 'women', or the domestic or intimate. 'Gender' has acquired many contested meanings in practice, but it often loses this sophistication to be read again as 'woman' (Cornwall 2001). But I did suggest that we might think further about some practices like the mothering practices of international nannies; arguably they pose some very interesting arguments about the ways in which the intimate and domestic can configure cosmopolitan spaces and practices. Sisters In Islam are, of course also

strongly engaged in domestic/family politics. Without being too essentialist one might well do worse than return to some of the feminist literature on maternal practice in looking to understand the cosmopolitan seeking after peace, justice and equity.

Do the kinds of practices discussed constitute 'cosmopolitan' practice? Should we worry about such nominalism? The widespread enthusiasm for the SIS project, for example, within global feminist and some Muslim reform circles points to some further key questions. I suggested that local commentary about the Malaysian women's movements has not been very concerned with it international context. But the nature of the Islamic national and transnational worlds in which SIS operates is of some interest: some of these spaces traverse those within which Olivier Roy's (2004) neofundamentalists and his radical neofundamentalists[15] alike operate in their quest for 'a pure Islamic countermodernity' or what Juan Cole calls an alternative [Islamic] modernity (2003: 771).[16] Anthony Appiah (2006) wants to nominate the radical neofundamentalists as counter-cosmopolitan: in so doing it is arguable that he is echoing the dominant geopolitical representations of a dualistic clash of civilisations between the supposedly particularistic 'tradition' of the 'Islamic' world and the supposedly pure universalism of the 'western' world (cf Kahn 2006, see Roy (2004). Joel Kahn makes a strong case against the Appiah view in his paper for this conference , arguing for understanding the fundamentalists as cosmopolitans. While the neofundamentalists' search for universal justice for the *ummah* perhaps marks it off from the Sisters' search for justice within the *ummah* and beyond, it is nonetheless an issue.

I have suggested that SIS imagine, draw on, and in the process further develop, a highly reflexive Islamic cosmopolitanism: it is clear that they have successfully created a multi-layered and complex, highly gendered cosmopolitan space ; this has robust links to global feminist/womanist cosmopolitan spaces and the international push for the claim that women's rights are human rights. As suggested, these spaces may usefully be termed an international counter-public, a cosmopolitan space inseparable from globalisation/globalism, in spite of the continuing geopolitical tensions within feminist/womanist./women's movements. Malaysian activists have not named their practice as transversal, but I would have thought it qualifies quite strongly for that name; moreover, at the risk of further neologising, might we move to couple the term with cosmopolitanism? Would the idea of a 'transversal cosmopolitanism' help to move the debates from some of the problematic dualities that continue to dog them?

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Endnotes

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2. As illustrative examples, see Vertovec and Cohen (2002) and the current *British Journal of Sociology* special issue on cosmopolitanism (March 2006). Beck and Sznaider's (2006)'Unpacking Cosmopolitanism for the Social Sciences: a Research Agenda' intro to the BJS special issue 'Unpacking Cosmopolitanism for the Social Sciences: a Research Agenda', mentions gender just once in passing (2006:20).

3. See Fong (2002).

4. *Public Culture* 12, 3, Fall 2000, Special Issue on Cosmopolitanism, Volume 4, Millennial Quartet, *A Public Culture* miniseries.

5. The old as a trope of colonial and secular modernity, the new a postcolonial cosmopolitanism, van de Veer (2002) .

6. This is also odd, given that in the Vertovec book, he discusses MadamBlavatsky, on of he founders of the Theosphical Society of Arya Samaj (2002: 175).

7. I am grateful to Maree Pardy for discussion on this point.

8. See for example Parreñas (2001a, 2001b); Adams and Dickey (2000); Chin (1998); Constable (1997); Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003); Yeoh, Huang and Gonzalez (1999); Yeoh and Huang (1999).

9. Elsewhere, I have written about what I term the internationalisation and postmodernisation of mothering in relation to both working class women migrants and to new middle class women in Asia (Stivens nda).

10. Following the Habermasian terminology about 'publics' employed by feminist writers like Seyla Benhabib (1992) and Nancy Fraser (1997). According to Fraser, the idea of a 'public' implies an arena of global citizen discourse within the nation–state, 'a

theatre of modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk' (Fraser 1997: 70).

11. Saskia Sassen, one of the leading theorists of globalisation, has foreseen an emerging human rights regime replacing nation-based citizenship (1996), but we might well be somewhat sceptical about this, wondering what institutions would enforce human rights in this new order. The problems with ideas of a global civil society or community have been widely debated in this literature, see Falk (1993), Stivens (2000a).

12. See http://www.candidate.freeservers.com/object.html for the main and associated WCI websites, which give an account of its history and activities. For a scholarly discussion of WCI see Martinez (2003).

13. I explore women's relationships to the versions of the modern in Stivens (1998a, 1998b, 2000b).

14. See Stivens ndb for discussions about gender and the postmodernisation of Islam in Malaysia.

15. Roy sees a division within neofundamentalism between the mainstream and radicals - the latter advocating jihad and violence as an individual act (2004: 254).Q to Roy: 'Does globalization thus feed pan-Islamic puritanism?' 'Globalization is a good opportunity to dissociate Islam from any given culture — and to provide a model that could work beyond any culture.' Globalized Islam, Olivier Roy | Wednesday, August 17, 2005http://www.theglobalist.com/DBWeb/StoryId.aspx?StoryId=4742 .

16. 'I use the phrase countermodernity rather than antimodernism because the Taliban adopted some key motifs from high modernism and depended on modern techniques for their power (the state, radio, mass spectacle, tank corps, and machine guns mounted on Toyotas', Cole 2003: 771).